The Wreckers' "All Hallows | Book #21
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The Wreckers' "All Hallows | Book #21

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Summary

In the twenty-first installment of the series, Vanessa's craving for a silly Halloween getaway leads the Wreckers to a supposedly quaint, Dracula-obsessed town in Transylvania. However, the crew soon discovers that the town's true horror lies not in its manufactured vampire attractions, but in a highly exclusive, refined estate where a charismatic "Contesa" operates a deeply sinister enterprise. Rather than dismantling a marriage, the team must figure out how to unmake a woman who systematically erases the identities of vulnerable young women to bind them to her service. Operating against a strict one-day deadline and utilizing the chaotic cover of the town's massive Halloween festival, the Wreckers must execute a complex psychological and logistical rescue mission to restore the stolen lives of the Contesa's captives and guide them back into the real world.

Chapter 1

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter One — Idle Hands

The trouble with destroying the world, Vanessa Smart had decided, was that afterward there was nothing on television.

She lay upside down on the longest of the three sofas in the Manhattan apartment, her head hanging off the edge, her dark auburn hair pooling toward the floor like spilled wine. From this angle the city beyond the windows was inverted — the skyline hanging down from a gray October sky, the East River a ribbon of pewter pressed against the ceiling of the world. She had been in this position for eleven minutes. She had checked.

"I'm bored," she announced, to no one and to everyone.

From the kitchen, the hiss of the espresso machine answered her first. Then Jordan's voice, unhurried, the texture of gravel warmed in the sun. "You said that at nine. And at ten. And once, memorably, in your sleep."

"Because it remains true. Boredom is not a mood, Jordan, it's a *condition*. It doesn't lift simply because you've decided to ignore it and make coffee instead."

"'m not ignoring it. I'm managing it. Those aren't the same thing." He came around the counter holding two small cups, the silver at his temples catching the flat morning light, his broad shoulders filling out a charcoal sweater that had cost roughly what a reasonable person spent on a car. He set one cup on the low table beside her upturned face. "Cortadito. Drink it before the blood rushes to your head and you start seeing prophecies."

"I always see prophecies. That's how I knew about the Whitakers." She reached up — or down, the geometry was confusing — and accepted the cup without changing position, sipping it at an angle that defied several laws. "Mm. You've gotten frighteningly good at this."

"I had a good teacher." He said it dryly, and did not elaborate, and the not-elaborating was its own small intimacy, because the teacher had been a barista in a city neither of them named anymore, on a job that

had ended with a marriage in ruins and a particular shade of green canvas apron that still surfaced, now and then, in the privacy of the apartment.

This was the thing strangers never understood about Vanessa and Jordan, on the rare occasions strangers understood anything about them at all: they were not partners in the way of business, and not lovers in the simple way of bodies, though they were emphatically both. They were something older and stranger — two people who had each been handed the wreckage of a life and had, instead of mourning, *learned the trade*.

Four years ago, give or take, they had been other people. Vanessa Smart had been an event planner — the elite kind, the kind summoned to build flawless illusions of joy for people too rich to feel any. Jordan Harlan had been a systems consultant, the man powerful men called when their invisible architectures broke, the man who could look at any structure and see precisely which load-bearing wall to lean on. They had each been married. They had each been, in the ordinary catastrophic way, betrayed — and the cruelest joke of it, the joke that had welded them together in a hotel bar on the worst night of both their lives, was that their spouses had been betraying them with *the same person*. The same mutual friend. The same charming smiling thief, working both marriages in the same season like a farmer rotating crops.

Most people, handed that, would have broken.

They had trauma-bonded instead, and then — this was the part that made them monstrous, and they knew it, and had made a sort of peace with it — they had gotten *good* at it. They had realized, somewhere in the wreckage, that Jordan's gift for seeing the load-bearing wall and Vanessa's gift for building beautiful illusions added up to a single terrible competence. They could find any marriage's fault line. And they could widen it until the whole thing came down.

So they did. For sport. Never for money — they had each retired absurdly young on fortunes that meant neither of them would ever again work a day they didn't choose, which was the entire point. Money would have made them mercenaries, and mercenaries took orders. They took only the targets that *offended* them: the arrogant, the untouchable, the smug architects of other people's small miseries who believed themselves beyond consequence. The Wreckers chose their own work, and they were beholden to exactly one authority, recited like a catechism whenever a job began:

We don't fall in love with them. We don't keep them. And when the work is finished, we reward ourselves. With each other. And only with each other.

The work, at present, was very much finished.

"The last one's still rippling out, if it cheers you up." This from the third corner of the apartment, where Aiko Nakamura sat cross-legged inside the blue glow of three monitors like a small elegant idol in a temple of her own design. She wore black, because she always wore black, a high-necked sleeveless thing that made her look carved. Her eyes didn't leave the screens. "Zurich woke up to find one of its quieter billionaires can no longer remember why anyone ever did what he said. The financial press is calling it a stroke. The financial press is so *trusting*."

"See, that's lovely," Vanessa said, "but it's *yesterday's* lovely. I need a *today*."

Aiko Nakamura had not always lived here. She had begun, like several of the people Vanessa now loved most, as a *target* — a brilliant woman in a glass tower in Tokyo, married to a man whose company made the future and whose attention had wandered everywhere except toward his wife. The Wreckers had gone to Tokyo to take that marriage apart, and they had succeeded, and then something had happened that the rules did not strictly account for: Aiko had been *more interesting than the wreck*. She had seen what they were doing — seen the architecture of it, the way only another architect could — and instead of shattering, she had asked, with genuine professional curiosity, if she could see the rest of the design.

She had become an ally. Then a friend. Then, on a job in London that had ended badly enough to leave a mark on all of them, she simply had not packed her servers to go home. She had stayed. The poly arithmetic of it had assembled itself quietly over a year — fierce, protective, intimate, *unspoken-but-total* — until one morning they had all woken up tangled in the same enormous bed and understood, without needing to say it, that they were a family. A small, lethal, profoundly strange family. With excellent coffee.

"Don't say *today* like that," Aiko said. "The last time you said *today* like that, we ended up extraditing a man to a country that technically wants to execute him."

"And he *deserved* it."

"He absolutely did. I'm only observing the correlation between your tone and my workload."

Vanessa finally, with great theatrical effort, righted herself — swinging her long legs around, sitting up in a flush of returning blood and silk, her cool assessing gaze sweeping the apartment as though seeing it for the first time and finding it wanting. She was, in her own mind and in every word she had ever spoken on the subject, twenty-nine years old. She had been twenty-nine for some time. She intended to remain twenty-nine until the heat death of the universe, at which point she would reassess.

"I don't want a wreck," she said slowly, and the sentence was so unprecedented that both of the others actually looked at her. "I mean it. We just did the biggest thing we will ever do. We reached *around the planet*. And do you know what I feel?"

"Triumphant?" Jordan offered.

"Empty," Aiko said, at the same moment, and Vanessa pointed at her like a teacher rewarding the bright student.

"*Empty.* Thank you, our maiden, yes. Hollow. Post-partum. We built the most elaborate thing of our lives and now it's *gone*, it belongs to the world now, it's just *consequences* unspooling in cities we'll never visit." She stood, and began to pace, which was always the sign that something was about to be decided whether anyone else agreed or not. "I don't want to *take something apart*. I'm tired of taking things apart. I want to *celebrate*. I want pleasure with no autopsy at the end of it. I want—" she stopped, and her face did something complicated and bright, "—I want *Halloween*."

There was a silence.

"It's October," Jordan said, carefully, in the tone of a man checking a structure for the load-bearing wall. "Halloween is, in fact, available."

"Not *Halloween* Halloween. Not bobbing for apples in this apartment like *invalids.*" She wheeled on them, and now the boredom was entirely gone, burned off and replaced by the thing that made her dangerous and delightful in equal measure — *appetite*. "We have done grief, and we have done vengeance, and last month we did *the apocalypse*. I am owed something *silly*. I want fog machines I didn't pay for. I want a town that has sold its own soul for the tourist season. I want bad capes and worse accents and overpriced garlic and a castle on a hill doing its absolute hardest to frighten me."

Her smile widened, slow and wicked and entirely without mercy toward the concept of subtlety. "I want to go to *Transylvania*."

Aiko took her hands off the keyboard for the first time all morning. "...You want to go to Dracula's house. For a holiday."

"I want to go to the *town that pretends to be* Dracula's house and charges forty euro for the privilege. There's a difference, and the difference is *delicious*." Vanessa was fully alight now. "Sighișoara. It's a real place, it's a medieval citadel, perfectly preserved, crooked little pastel houses and a clock tower, and it is the *actual birthplace* of the actual man the legend is built on, and so the entire town has spent six hundred years monetizing a ghost. Can you *imagine* a place more designed for me to enjoy myself?"

"You're a real witch," Jordan said.

He'd meant it fondly — meant it the way you'd say it to a child gleeful over a small cruelty, the way you'd say it about her scheming delight, her bottomless theatrical appetite for the macabre. It was an affectionate, throwaway thing. He went back to his coffee.

But Vanessa turned and *looked* at him, and for just a moment — half a second, no more — something passed behind her eyes that was older than the joke. Then it was gone, and she was grinning again.

"I *am*," she said. "And I'm taking my coven."

"I'm not a witch," said Aiko. "I'm IT support."

"You're our *maiden*."

"I'm a thirty-one-year-old woman with two doctorates who is, at this moment, holding a country's intelligence apparatus in a folder on her desktop, and you keep calling me a *maiden*—"

"Pack a cloak," Vanessa said serenely. "And I'm flying in the 'Ströms. Linnéa has been *insufferable* since Stockholm, she texts me pictures of her handstands, she needs a project, and Tatum will keep her from actually killing anyone, and besides—" she clasped her hands, delighted, "—it isn't a *coven* with only three. You need at least five witches before a town starts locking its doors. Everyone knows that."

Jordan set down his empty cup. He looked, for a long moment, at the woman he had built a life of beautiful ruin alongside, and at the woman folded glowing in the corner pretending to be exasperated,

and at the gray inverted city, and he weighed, the way he always weighed, the structural soundness of the thing being proposed.

"It'll rain," he said. "It's the Carpathians in late October. It'll rain the entire time."

"*Good,*" Vanessa breathed, as though he'd promised her diamonds. "It should be *atmospheric.*"

Chapter 2

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Chapter Two — Eastbound

Vanessa did not believe in flying to a thing one could *arrive* at.

"Anyone can fly," she'd said, when Jordan proposed the four-hour hop that would have deposited them in Bucharest by lunch. "Flying is for people with somewhere to *be*. We have somewhere to *become* — roughly a thousand kilometers of continent unspooling outside a window while someone brings me wine."

So it was that, ten days and a little before the world's most commercial brush with death, they boarded a train in Paris.

Not *the* train — not the lacquered blue-and-gold legend itself, though Vanessa had made enquiries and been told, with Gallic finality, that it did not go east in October. What she had chartered instead was its lesser cousin and her own private invention besides: a string of restored wagons-lits hitched to a sleeper service that would carry them across the spine of Europe and lay them, eventually, at the foot of the Carpathians. Mahogany and brass. Marquetry in the dining car depicting cranes she suspected were not anatomically possible. Beds that folded out of the walls like secrets.

They departed from the Gare de l'Est under a roof of soot-darkened iron and pale October light, from the very platforms where, a century before, men in good coats had boarded for Constantinople with revolvers in their luggage and worse intentions in their hearts. Vanessa stood on the platform a moment longer than necessary, breathing in the diesel and the damp and the ghosts.

"You're doing the thing," Aiko observed to Vanessa, behind her, dragging a hard-shell case that contained, by weight, either a body or a server rack. It was a server rack. "The thing where you smell a train station like it's a wine."

"I'm *savoring*. You should try it. It's free, unlike everything else I've arranged."

"I savor through screens. I brought four." Aiko surveyed the carriage steps, the brass handrail, the white-gloved attendant waiting to hand

her up, and her face performed a small private war between professional contempt and reluctant delight. "...The handrail is real brass."

"The *whole train* is real brass, darling. That's the entire point of it."

"I'm going to find an outlet."

"There are no outlets," Jordan interjected, "There are *sconces*."

Aiko made a sound like a kettle reaching temperature and boarded anyway.

The first day was France, which Vanessa loved and refused to be sentimental about, and then the long blue evening over Alsace, vineyards combed in rows up the hillsides, the Vosges going purple in the west. Jordan sat across from her in the dining car with a glass of something Burgundian and watched the country pass with the quiet attention of a man reading a structure he admired. He did not narrate it. That was one of the ten thousand reasons she'd kept him: he knew when a view was doing its own talking.

They woke the second morning in Austria, and Austria was *showing off*.

The train threaded the Semmering — the oldest mountain railway in the world, a thing of impossible nineteenth-century audacity, stone viaducts arching across gorges that fell away green and dizzying beneath them, tunnels punched through living rock by men who'd never see a photograph of what they'd built. Mist hung in the valleys like something poured. Pine forest climbed walls of mountain so steep the trees seemed to be holding on by faith. Far below, a single church spire pricked up through the cloud, and then was gone.

"Okay," Aiko admitted, pressed to the window with a coffee she'd forgotten to drink. "Okay. This one's better than a screen."

"*Thank* you."

"I said *this one*. I'm not converting. I'm acknowledging a strong individual data point."

By midday they came down out of the mountains into the broad Danube plain, and the train slid into Vienna beneath the vast vaulted glass of the Hauptbahnhof, and there — because the universe enjoyed contrast as much as Vanessa did — the majesty of three days' travel

collided head-on with the Stockholm contingent.

They heard Linnéa before they saw her.

"*VANESSA SMART, YOU MAGNIFICENT GOTH.*"

She came down the platform at a dead sprint, blond and gleaming and entirely too fast for an enclosed public space, a duffel bouncing off one shoulder and a garment bag streaming behind her like a banner, and she did not slow at the carriage steps so much as *convert her momentum*, planting one hand on the brass rail and vaulting clean up onto the platform-level vestibule in a single flexed arc that drew a small horrified gasp from the white-gloved attendant and a smattering of genuine applause from a German tour group who assumed it was theater.

She landed in front of Vanessa, beaming, not even breathing hard.

"Ten years of competitive gymnastics," she announced, "and *this* is what I use it for. Vaulting onto trains to terrorize my friends. My coaches would weep."

"Your coaches," said the woman now approaching at a civilized walking pace, "would say what they always said, which is *Linnéa, the floor is not a suggestion.*" Tatum Angstrom arrived with two sensible wheeled cases and the unbothered calm of a woman who had spent years as the gravity to Linnéa's flight. She kissed Vanessa's cheek, then Jordan's, then peered past them into the carriage. "Hello, Aiko."

"Tatum. Thank God. A reasonable person."

"Don't let her hear you. She thinks she's the reasonable one."

"I *am* the reasonable one," Linnéa said, already halfway into the carriage, already opening cupboards, already discovering the absence of outlets and the presence of sconces with a delighted shriek. "Tatum's the *boring* one. I'm the *fun* one. It's a whole ecosystem. VANESSA. There are *fold-out beds*. Is this a spy train? Are we spies now? I packed for spies."

"You packed," said Tatum, "four capes."

"We're going to *Transylvania*, Tatum, four capes is *restraint*—"

And the train pulled out of Vienna with the whole family aboard, which was the only way Vanessa had ever wanted to travel, and

which she would later say — when the thing in Sighișoara had gone as far sideways as it eventually went — had been the last wholly happy afternoon of the entire affair.

East of Vienna the land changed, and kept changing. They crossed the Danube at Budapest in the gold of late afternoon, the river wide and slow and bottle-green, the Parliament rising off the far bank like a wedding cake designed by someone with a grievance against restraint, the Buda hills purpling behind it. The train paused at Keleti station — grand, soot-stained, echoing, a cathedral built to the worship of departure — and then drew east again, and that was where Europe began, almost imperceptibly, to get *older*.

The towns came farther apart. The fields widened. Somewhere in the night they crossed into Romania, and Vanessa stayed up to feel it, sitting alone in the dark dining car with the cranes that couldn't exist, watching unlit villages slide past, a single dog trotting along a road to nowhere, the occasional window burning yellow in a sea of black countryside.

And then it was morning, and it was *Transylvania*, and even Vanessa went quiet.

The Carpathians stood up out of the mist on every side, dark with fir, their peaks lost in cloud that didn't lift so much as *breathe*. The valleys were impossibly green and impossibly old. They passed villages that had not meaningfully changed in three hundred years — ochre and white houses with steep clay-tiled roofs, fortified Saxon churches squatting at the center of each one like stone hens over their flocks, their walls built thick enough to outlast empires, which they had. A man drove a wooden cart behind two horses down a lane beside the tracks, unhurried, a scythe laid across the boards behind him. Haystacks stood in the fields like something out of a painting nobody alive remembered painting. On a telephone pole, enormous and shaggy and utterly indifferent to the train, a stork stood in a nest the size of a bathtub.

"It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen," Linnéa said, and for once she said it softly.

"It really is," Tatum agreed, her hand finding Linnéa's.

"Ten days before Halloween," Jordan said, checking nothing, because he never needed to check, "and it looks like the inside of a fairy tale."

"It *is* the inside of a fairy tale," said Vanessa, and there was

something almost reverent in it. "The real kind. The old kind. The kind where the woods are genuinely dangerous and the church walls are thick for a reason and everyone goes inside before dark and *means it.*"

Then the train rounded the shoulder of a hill, and Sighișoara came into view — the citadel crowning its rise above the Târnava Mare, a clutch of medieval towers and terracotta roofs and the great Clock Tower standing watch over all of it, six hundred years old, the genuine, breathtaking, UNESCO-listed article — and for one perfect suspended moment it was the most majestic thing any of them had ever seen.

And then the train pulled into the station, and they got off, and the moment *detonated.*

Because the citadel was real, but the *town below it* had seen the tourists coming six hundred years out and had prepared accordingly.

The first thing Vanessa saw, before she'd even cleared the platform, was a forty-foot vinyl banner of a snarling cartoon vampire welcoming her to THE BIRTHPLACE OF DRACULA in four languages, fangs dripping a red that matched no blood produced by any earthly creature. The second thing she saw was a man in a polyester cape and plastic fangs handing out flyers for a "AUTHENTIC MEDIEVAL VAMPYR DUNGEON EXPERIENCE — 2 FOR 1 BEFORE NOON." The third thing was a souvenir kiosk selling, in roughly equal volume, hand-carved wooden icons of genuine artistic merit and snow globes in which a tiny plastic Dracula menaced a tiny plastic peasant under a blizzard of red glitter.

A taxi went by with fangs mounted on its hood.

Somewhere, inexplicably, a fog machine that no one had asked for was pumping dry-ice mist across a perfectly sunny cobblestone square, where it dispersed immediately and pointlessly into the crisp mountain air while a recording of a wolf howl played on a four-second loop from a speaker disguised, badly, as a rock.

A café advertised "DRACULA CAPPUCCINO — NOW WITH BLOOD (RASPBERRY)."

The actual house — the real, genuine, ochre-yellow house where the actual historical man had genuinely been born — stood up the hill in the citadel, and it was, Vanessa would learn, a restaurant. With a gift shop. Where one could dine on "BOYAR'S FEAST" beneath a portrait of

Vlad and purchase, on the way out, fang-shaped pasta.

Linnéa turned in a slow, ecstatic circle, taking in the banners and the capes and the pointless fog and the howling rock, four capes' worth of pure joy radiating off her.

"This," she breathed, "is the stupidest place on Earth."

"It's *perfect,*" Vanessa corrected, and her smile spread slow and wide and wicked, the smile of a connoisseur who has traveled three days and a thousand kilometers and arrived, at last, at the single greatest concentration of beautiful nonsense the human species had ever assembled in one walled town. She spread her arms to it. The fog machine chose that moment to cough out one last doomed cloud behind her, and a passing tourist photographed her by accident, and she looked, for a moment, exactly like the thing on the banner.

"Ten days." She slid her arm through his without looking away from the howling rock. "Where did you put us?"

"Somewhere with a view of all this," he said, "and a name I refuse to say out loud until you see it."

Chapter 3

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Chapter Three — Castel Drakula (With a K)

The climb into the citadel was the second beautiful thing the town had done to them, after the view from the train, and it nearly redeemed the fangs.

They went up on foot — Jordan had the bags sent ahead — through the lower town and up the Scholars' Stairs, the covered wooden staircase that had carried schoolchildren up the hill since the seventeenth century, 175 worn steps roofed in dark timber so that the climb happened in a long brown twilight smelling of old wood and rain. They came out at the top into the citadel proper, and it was, for a moment, perfect again: cobbled lanes too narrow for cars, leaning houses in faded ochre and rose and dove-gray, the great Clock Tower presiding over all of it with its painted figurines and its six centuries of patience, the whole walled town hushed and golden in the falling afternoon.

"I take back one of my capes," Linnéa said reverently. "This is genuinely stunning."

"It really is," Tatum said.

"Hold that feeling," said Jordan.

He stopped them in front of a house.

It was, structurally, a gem — a tall Saxon burgher's house, fifteenth-century at the bones, three stories of honey-colored stucco with a steep tiled roof and deep-set windows and a carved stone doorway worn smooth by five hundred years of hands. It was, Vanessa could see at a glance, one of the loveliest buildings on the lane.

It had been *decorated*.

A wrought-iron sign hung over the door, and the sign had clearly once said something dignified in German, and someone had bolted over it a back-lit acrylic placard reading, in dripping crimson letters beneath a bat with an unsettling number of teeth:

CASTEL DRAKULA

Boutique Lair & Wellness

Plastic ivy, the kind that fades to gray within a season and had, climbed the doorframe. A pair of resin gargoyles flanked the steps, one of them missing an ear. In the deep-set medieval windows, where leaded glass had survived the Habsburgs and two world wars, someone had hung string lights shaped like tiny skulls. A sandwich board on the cobbles promised FREE WELCOME SHOT OF ŢUICĂ (BLOOD RED) and 10% OFF FANG FITTING.

There was a long silence.

"You refused to say the name," Vanessa said slowly, "because of the *K*."

"I refused to say the name," Jordan agreed, "because of the K. It's the best house on the lane. It has the best view in the citadel — you can see the whole lower town and the station and three of the towers from the top floor. The woman who runs it restored the interior herself and it's genuinely magnificent." He looked up at the toothy bat. "And then she did *this* to the outside, because the genuinely magnificent version was earning a third of what the bat earns. I found it very instructive."

"It's *the whole town in one building,*" Vanessa breathed, delighted. "It's beautiful and it's drowning in fangs and someone made an *economic decision*—"

The door banged open.

"You are the Americans!" The woman who filled the doorway was perhaps sixty, built like a stove, gray hair scraped into a bun that had won every argument it had ever had with a hairpin, and she was wiping her hands on an apron printed — Vanessa nearly wept with joy — with a repeating pattern of cartoon Draculas. "And the Swedish ones, the booking said. Five. I am Rodica. Welcome to Castel Drakula." She pronounced it with the K landing like a dropped pot. "With a K. The other way, the famous way, there are lawyers." She waved a dismissive hand at the entire concept of intellectual property. "Come, come, the ţuică is poured, it is only ţuică, the blood is beetroot, nobody has died. *Yet.*" She laughed, enormously, at a joke she had clearly made nine thousand times and would make nine thousand more. "Is a joke. Come."

The inside stopped them at the threshold.

Because the inside was the thing Jordan had promised — the real thing, lovingly and expensively restored, the thing the bat outside was paying for. Lime-washed walls and original beams dark as chocolate. A vaulted ceiling. A vast tiled stove in the corner, a genuine antique, glazed green and warm to stand near. Hand-woven runners on flagstone floors. It smelled of woodsmoke and beeswax and something baking.

It also had, mounted over the beautiful stove, a flat-screen television playing a silent loop of a 1960s vampire film, and a basket by the door labeled FANGS — TAKE ONE — SANITIZED, and a rack of capes for guest use in three sizes.

"You did this," Vanessa said to Rodica, with the awe of one professional recognizing another. "The beautiful part *and* the bat part. Both of you. You're the same person."

Rodica looked at her with sudden sharp interest, the laugh paused. "...Yes," she said. "Most people only see the one." She handed Vanessa a small glass of alarmingly red liquor. "You are not most people."

"She is *aggressively* not most people," Aiko said, accepting her own glass and eyeing it with scientific suspicion.

"I built the inside for me," Rodica said, leading them up a staircase that creaked in a register Linnéa immediately fell in love with. "Twenty years. My husband, before he died, he said *Rodica, nobody will pay for old beams, they want a castle and a count.* He was right, may he rest. So now the inside is for me, and the outside—" she flapped the Dracula apron, "—the outside is for the mortgage. You stay long?"

"Ten days," Vanessa said. "Through Halloween."

"*Ahh.*" Rodica stopped on the landing and turned, and something complicated moved across her broad face — pride and weariness and the specific exhaustion of a small business owner during peak season. "Then you will see it at its worst. Or its best. Depends who you ask. The whole town goes mad for the Halloween. The tours, the parties, the *experiences.*" She said *experiences* the way another woman might say *cockroaches.* "Everyone with a cape and a card machine. It was not always so much. But—" she shrugged, vast and philosophical, "—the money comes when the money comes."

She showed them the rooms. Linnéa and Tatum got the big one with the carved bed. Vanessa and Jordan got the top floor with the view

Jordan had promised — and it was every bit of it, the whole lower town spread out gold and gray below the window, the river, the towers, the station where their train still sat steaming.

And Aiko got the small room at the back, under the eaves, with one window facing a wall.

"This is the staff room," Aiko said flatly.

"Is the single," said Rodica.

"I have two doctorates."

"Is a very nice single. Good for one quiet person. You seem quiet." Rodica patted her on the shoulder with the finality of a woman who had assigned rooms for twenty years and would not be relitigating. "The others are couples. You are the—" she gestured, searching for the English, "—the extra."

"The *maiden,*" Vanessa supplied sweetly, from down the hall.

"*The maiden,* yes, exactly the word—"

"I'm getting that printed on something," Aiko muttered, and went into the staff room, and shut the door, and did not, anyone noticed, actually sound upset, because she had already spotted the one thing the room had that no other room did, which was a clear sightline and a window ledge wide enough for four monitors.

Later — much later, after the beetroot ţuică and an enormous dinner Rodica refused to let them pay for "the first night, the first night is mine," after Linnéa had worn a guest cape to the table unironically and Tatum had confiscated it before the soup — Vanessa sat at the top-floor window with a real glass of real wine and watched the town go dark.

It did not go dark the way the train villages had. Down in the lower town, as the genuine dusk came on, the *manufactured* dark switched on to meet it — colored floodlights washing the citadel walls in blood-red and bruise-purple, a laser projecting a bat onto the side of the Clock Tower, the distant thump of music from somewhere that was clearly charging a cover. The fog machines, freed at last from the indignity of daylight, came into their own. Mist rolled down the cobbled lanes looking, in the colored light, almost genuinely eerie.

And on the far side of the citadel, higher even than Castel Drakula,

one building stood lit differently from all the rest — not the cheap red wash, not the lasers, but a tasteful, expensive, *restrained* amber glow, picking out old stone with the confidence of real money and real taste, a single elegant point of *quality* in the whole sea of plastic fangs.

Vanessa looked at it for a long moment.

"What's that one?" she asked, when Rodica came up to leave fresh towels.

Rodica followed her gaze, and her face did the complicated thing again, the pride-and-weariness thing, except this time there was a third ingredient in it that Vanessa filed away without naming.

"That," Rodica said, "is the one that does it *properly.*" She set the towels down. "Sleep well. The walls are thick, the shutters close from inside. Whoever built this room wanted to decide who came in." A beat. "I have always liked that about it."
She left.

Vanessa sat at the window a while longer, looking at the one tasteful light in the kingdom of fangs, and felt, somewhere under the wine and the contentment and the ten lovely empty days ahead of her, the first faint, familiar, unwelcome *itch.*

She ignored it. She was on holiday.

She was very good at ignoring things she had no intention of ignoring for long.

Chapter 4

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Four — Holiday

The next morning Vanessa Smart came down to breakfast wearing fangs.

They were from the basket by the door — TAKE ONE, SANITIZED — and she wore them with total commitment over a cashmere wrap that cost more than the building's annual heating, and she sat at Rodica's long table and buttered a roll and said, with a pronounced lisp she made no effort to correct, "Good morning, coven," and dared anyone to comment.

"You sound," said Aiko, "like a woman who has had dental work and regrets."

"I sound *menathing.*"

"You sound like that."

"Linnéa understands." Vanessa gestured with the roll. Linnéa had come down in a cape — a *different* cape, a fourth cape, a cape Tatum had not yet had the chance to confiscate — and was eating an entire breakfast one-handed because she refused to take it off.

"I think we should commit to the bit," Linnéa said, around eggs. "All of us. Full vampire. Ten days. We go feral. When in Rome."

"This is not Rome," said Tatum. "This is a Saxon trading town with a tasteful interior and a humiliating exterior, and you are getting yolk on a six-hundred-year-old chair."

"The chair has *seen things,* Tatum. The chair can handle an egg."

Rodica swept through with a pot of coffee and surveyed the fangs and the cape with the serene approval of a woman whose entire business model had just been validated at her own breakfast table. "*This* is how you do the Sighișoara," she announced. "Not like the ones who come for one hour, take the photo at the Dracula house, and go. You *stay.* You *wear the teeth.*" She refilled Jordan's cup without being asked. "He does not wear the teeth."

"He's the responsible one," Vanessa lisped.

"Someone," Jordan said, "has to be able to speak without whistling when we need a table."

They did the whole town. They did it the way no sane local would and the way every tourist secretly longed to: completely, shamelessly, all of it.

They climbed the Clock Tower first, up the tight medieval stair to the museum at the top, where Vanessa lingered far too long over the painted wooden figurines that turned out on their little mechanism to mark the days of the week — a different small carved deity rotating into the window each midnight, six hundred years of clockwork that had outlived the empire that built it. From the gallery at the top the whole valley opened beneath them, the red roofs and the river and the green hills folding away east toward mountains they couldn't see, and for a moment even Linnéa stopped narrating.

"That's the real thing," Jordan said quietly, beside Vanessa at the rail. "Whatever else they've bolted onto it."

"That's always the real thing," she said. "There's always a real thing under the fangs. That's what makes the fangs bearable." She was not lisping now. She'd taken the teeth out to see the view properly. "Most places, the real thing is gone and the fangs are all that's left. Here it's still under there. You can feel it."

Then she put the fangs back in and they went and did a vampire walking tour.

The guide was a young man named Sorin in a cape that had clearly been hemmed by someone who loved him, and his patter was magnificent and terrible, a dense fog of historical fact and total invention delivered in a sepulchral monotone that broke, every few sentences, into an entirely cheerful normal voice to tell them where the toilets were. *And here, in the year of our darkness, the Impaler took his bloody supper — the bathrooms are by the second tower if anyone needs — and the screams, they say, can still be heard—*

Linnéa heckled with the focus of an artist.

"How do you know they can still be heard?"

"It is said—"

"By who? Who said? Give me a name."

"The legend—"

"The legend doesn't have a *source,* Sorin, that's the whole problem with the legend—"

"*Linnéa.*"

"I'm engaging with the material, Tatum, he loves it—"

Sorin, to his credit, did seem to love it; he had clearly never had a tour group pay this much aggressive attention and was rising to it, his invented history growing more baroque and unfalsifiable by the minute, until by the end he and Linnéa had co-authored an entirely new legend about a fictional countess that Vanessa thought was honestly better structured than the real one.

They had lunch at the Dracula house.

The actual house — ochre-yellow, genuine, the genuine plaque, the genuine claim — was a restaurant now, as Jordan had warned, and they ate the Boyar's Feast under a stern portrait of Vlad and it was, infuriatingly, *delicious,* heavy and smoky and perfect, and then a waiter murmured to Vanessa that for a small additional fee the family might wish to visit the room upstairs *where he was born,* and Vanessa paid the small additional fee with the alacrity of a woman who knew exactly what she was buying, and they trooped upstairs into a dim red-lit chamber, and a man leapt out of a coffin.

He leapt out of a coffin in a cape, roaring, and Linnéa — who had survived a decade of elite competition, who had nerves like cured steel, who feared nothing — screamed at a pitch that startled pigeons three streets away and reflexively assumed a fighting stance, and Tatum laughed so hard she had to sit down on the floor of the birthplace of Dracula, and Aiko filmed all of it, and Jordan said, to the man in the coffin, with grave courtesy, "Excellent work," and the man, still half-risen and slightly thrown, said "...thank you, sir," and lay back down.

"I was *startled,*" Linnéa kept saying, all the way down the stairs. "Startled is not scared. A startle is a *reflex.* Aiko, delete that."

"Never."

"*Delete it—*"

"It's already in three places. It's load-balanced. It's the most important thing I've ever protected."

They bought things. They bought, specifically: one snow globe in which a tiny Dracula menaced a tiny peasant under red glitter (Vanessa, for the apartment, "for *irony,* Jordan, it's *ironic*"); a bag of fang-shaped pasta (Aiko, who intended to serve it to people without explanation and watch their faces); a hand-carved icon of genuine artistry (Tatum, who had wandered into the one shop that wasn't a joke and found the one craftsman who wasn't either); and a fifth cape (Linnéa, obviously, "it's *navy,* the others are black, it's a totally different cape").

And somewhere in the middle of the afternoon, in the lull between the souvenir spree and the next ridiculous thing, the town did its other trick — the one Vanessa had felt from the Clock Tower — and reminded them what was underneath.

They climbed the covered stairs to the top of the hill, to the old Gothic church that stood above everything, and behind it they found the Saxon cemetery: terraced into the hillside under enormous beeches, three hundred years of German names on leaning stones, the people who had built this town and named these towers and carved that doorway, gone now, the last of them mostly gone home to a Germany their families had left eight centuries before. It was very quiet. The beech leaves came down in the cold gold light. No fog machine reached up here. No laser. Just the real dark gathering early under the trees, and the thick church walls, and the old names going soft on the stones.

The five of them stood among the graves without talking for a while.

"Okay," Linnéa said finally, softly, and she had taken the cape off without anyone noticing. "*This* is the scary part of the town. Not the guy in the coffin. This."

"It's not scary," Tatum said, her arm around her. "It's just true."

"That's what I meant."

Vanessa stood a little apart, reading a stone — a woman's name, a long-ago date, the German word for *beloved* worn nearly to nothing — and felt the holiday settle into her properly for the first time, the genuine article, the rest she'd actually come for. Not the fangs. This. The realness under the fangs, and the people she loved standing quiet in the leaves, and ten whole days with nowhere to wreck and no one

to be.

"Come on," she said, turning back to them, and her voice was warm. "Rodica's making the thing with the doughnuts. And I want my wine and my terrible view and my family, and I do not want to think about a single serious thing until at least tomorrow."

They went down the covered stairs in the falling dark, Linnéa already narrating again, Aiko showing Tatum the coffin video for the fourth time, Jordan's hand finding the small of Vanessa's back on the worn wooden steps.

It was, she would think later, exactly as perfect as she'd wanted it to be.

Chapter 5

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Five — The Invitation

The doughnuts, it turned out, had a name, and the name was *papanași,* and Rodica served them the next morning with the gravity of a woman presenting a coronation.

They were fried, faintly sweet, crowned with sour cream and a dark jam she said was made from her own sour cherries, "*vișine,* not the cherries you know, the cherries that have *opinions*," and Linnéa ate four and proposed marriage to the recipe and then, when Rodica explained the recipe had been her grandmother's and was not for sale at any price, proposed marriage to Rodica.

"I am sixty-one and you are a child," Rodica said, refilling the sour cream.

"I'm thirty-four and I have excellent knees—"

"Eat your cherries."

It was a slow, gold morning, the kind that follows a perfect day without diminishing it. Aiko had emerged from the staff room looking, against all odds, *rested* — she had spent the night, she reported, watching the colored floodlights cycle across the citadel walls from her wall-facing window, which it turned out caught the reflected glow off the building opposite, "like having a lava lamp the size of a church," and had decided the room was acceptable. Jordan and Rodica had fallen into the easy rhythm of two logisticians who recognized each other; he was helping her diagnose a radiator, and she was telling him which of the town's restaurants would poison him and which would merely disappoint.

Vanessa sat at the window with her coffee and the last of the cherries and watched the citadel wake up — shutters opening, a delivery van wedging itself impossibly up a lane built for oxcarts, Sorin the tour guide already at the foot of the Clock Tower in his loving cape, rehearsing his monotone to no one. She felt entirely, dangerously content.

Which is why, when she announced she was going for a walk, *alone,*

Jordan looked up from the radiator.

"A walk," he said.

"A *constitutional.* People take them. It's very healthy."

"Where to?"

"Nowhere in particular." She was already wrapping a scarf. "Up the hill, perhaps. I want to see the citadel in the morning before the buses come."

Jordan held her eyes for a moment — he knew exactly which building stood at the top of the hill, and exactly what color it had glowed the night before, and exactly how good Vanessa was at *nowhere in particular* — and then, because the rule of their entire life together was that he let her walk toward the thing she was pretending not to walk toward, he said only, "Take the navy cape. It's cold."

"I will not take the navy cape."

"Linnéa will be hurt."

"Linnéa will never know." She kissed the top of his head and went.

The citadel in the morning was the real thing again, the fog machines still sleeping, the cobbles wet and shining, woodsmoke threading up from the chimneys. Vanessa climbed without hurrying, past the leaning houses, past a cat conducting important business on a windowsill, up toward the high side of the hill where the tasteful amber light had burned the night before — and found, in daylight, that it belonged to a house.

Not a house like Rodica's. A *house.* The largest on the hill, a former patrician mansion of dressed gray stone, austere and beautiful and absolutely free of fangs. No banner. No bat. No string lights. Only a small bronze plaque, polished to a shine, beside a heavy iron-studded door, and on the plaque, in letters so restrained they were almost a whisper:

CASA CORVINA
by invitation

"It's the only sign in town with the confidence to tell you you can't come in."

Vanessa turned.

The woman had come out of the lane behind her without a sound, and was standing with her hands folded, regarding the plaque with the fond exasperation of an owner — fifties, perhaps, though beautifully uncertain, dark hair shot with a deliberate streak of silver and pinned up with something that caught the light, dressed in charcoal wool that had been cut by someone who understood her shoulders. She wore no costume. She did not need one. She had the stillness of a woman who had never once in her life had to raise her voice to be obeyed.

"Everyone else in this town," the woman went on, in English lightly accented and beautifully cold, "screams at the tourist. *Come in, come in, see the vampire, here is a fang, here is a shot of plum brandy dyed to look like blood.*" Her mouth curved. "I found that if you simply close the door and charge four hundred euro, the right people climb the hill to knock on it. People are extraordinary. They will pay anything not to be the kind of person who pays nothing."

"That," said Vanessa, with real admiration, "is the most honest thing anyone has said to me since I got off the train."

"You came on the train." It wasn't a question. The woman's dark eyes moved over her — the scarf, the boots, the bones of her, the particular way Vanessa stood — with the swift total inventory of an appraiser, and arrived, clearly, at a number she liked. "The private train. Three days from Paris, to a town one can reach by airport in an afternoon. The whole town has talked of nothing else. Five of you, in Rodica's little fang-house, for ten days." The curve again. "You are not here for the fog machines."

"I'm on holiday."

"Mm. So am I. Always. It's the only way to do serious work." She extended a hand — cool, dry, a single antique ring. "I am the Contesa. Everyone says it as a joke, and then they keep saying it, which is how you know it has stopped being one."

Vanessa took the hand. "Vanessa."

The Contesa held it a moment, and her dark eyes did that swift total inventory again — not the look of a woman who has read something about you, but the look of a woman who doesn't *need* to read anything. "No," she said softly, as if confirming a private guess. "No — you won't tell me the rest, and I won't ask. But I know the species when it climbs my hill. We're very rare, you and I. We can always

smell each other across a room. It's lonely work, mostly." She let it sit exactly one beat too long, then released the hand with a small generous wave, as though she had not just told Vanessa *I see you, precisely, all the way down.* "One recognizes one's own."

"And what is it," Vanessa asked, "that you and I are?"

"People who build the thing other people only pretend to," said the Contesa simply. "Will you come up some evening? Casa Corvina does a dinner. The right people, the real history — not Rodica's bat, the *actual* dark, the thing all of this—" a flick of her fingers at the town below, the banners, the howling rock, "—is a cheap photograph of. You would be bored by the fangs. You would not be bored by me."

"No," Vanessa agreed. "I don't think I would."

"Bring your coven." The Contesa was already turning to go, the audience concluded on her schedule, not Vanessa's. "All five. I insist. I so rarely get to perform for someone who understands the *craft.*"

And as she turned, a young woman Vanessa had not noticed stepped out of the doorway of Casa Corvina to hold it open for her — slight, lovely, perhaps twenty-five, in the same charcoal palette, with a clipboard held to her chest and a smile that arrived precisely on time and left precisely on schedule. "Good morning," the girl said to Vanessa, warm and smooth and rehearsed. "We'll send a card."

"Thank you, darling," the Contesa said to her, without looking at her, the way one thanks a door for opening — and the girl's smile held, perfectly, and Vanessa watched the girl's eyes for exactly the half-second it took the Contesa to sweep past her, and saw, underneath the lovely rehearsed warmth, something flat and careful and *watchful,* the look of a person who has learned to read weather in another person's back.

Then the door closed, and the bronze plaque whispered its little whisper, and the hill was just a hill again.

Vanessa stood a moment in the cold clean morning.

Then she walked back down to the fang-house, where her family was, and where Linnéa was loudly defending the navy cape's honor, and she did not mention Casa Corvina, or the four hundred euro, or the woman who had looked at her and named the species.

She did, however, find that the contentment of the morning had

changed its flavor very slightly — gone from the warm full stop of a holiday to something with an edge under it, something that hummed.

"Good walk?" Jordan asked, not looking up from the radiator.

"Lovely," said Vanessa. "Crisp."

And she meant it, and it was true, and she was already — quietly, helplessly, the way water finds the crack — beginning to wonder about a girl with a clipboard and a smile that ran on a timer.

Chapter 6

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Six — By Invitation

The card arrived at four o'clock, and it arrived *correctly.*

Not by post, not by phone, not by a QR code on a flyer. A boy of about twelve in a clean white shirt walked up the lane, knocked at Castel Drakula's fang-festooned door, and handed Rodica a single envelope of cream cardstock so heavy it had opinions, sealed in wax the color of old wine, addressed in fountain-pen copperplate to *The Guests of the House.* Then he declined a tip with grave dignity and walked back down the hill.

Rodica turned the envelope over in her broad hands and did not hand it across right away. Her face had gone to the third ingredient again — the one Vanessa had clocked at the window the first night, the pride and the weariness and the something-else — and this time the something-else was closer to the surface.

"This is from up the hill," she said. It was not a question, and she did not say it warmly.

"Is it?" said Vanessa, who had not mentioned the hill to anyone.

Rodica gave her a long look. "You walked up there this morning. The cat lady on the corner tells me everything; she has nothing else." She set the envelope on the long table, slowly, the way you set down something you'd rather throw. "You met her."

"I met a woman who charges four hundred euro to not let people in. She was charming."

"Yes." Rodica wiped her hands on the Dracula apron, though they were dry. "She is very charming. Charming is what she sells." She seemed about to say more, and then the shopkeeper in her — the woman who depended on this town and everyone in it and could not afford a war on the hill — closed the door on it. "Open your card. It is your holiday. I am only the landlady." And she went back to the kitchen, and banged a pot once, harder than the pot deserved.

Linnéa had the envelope open before the kitchen door finished

swinging.

"*'Casa Corvina requests the pleasure,'*" she read aloud, in a terrible aristocratic accent, "*'of the company of the lady Vanessa and her party, for dinner, the evening of the twenty-eighth—'* the twenty-eighth, that's two days, *'—an evening of the genuine article, in a town of imitations.'* Oh, I *love* her. *'Dress as you would for a funeral you secretly enjoyed.'* I am going to *marry* her, Tatum—"

"You keep proposing to women in this country," Tatum observed. "It's becoming a foreign-policy issue."

"It's a beautiful country full of women who can cook and curate. I'm only human." Linnéa flipped the card. "There's no price on it. For us. There's a price for everyone, Vanessa said four hundred euro, and for *us* there's no price, which means—"

"Which means she wants something," said Aiko, from the corner, without looking up.

The room cooled by a degree.

Aiko had her smallest laptop open on her knees, the one she pretended was for email, and the blue light moved on her face. "I started looking when you came back from your *constitutional* with a hum in your voice," she said to Vanessa. "You only hum when you've met a problem you like." She turned the laptop around, then thought better of it and just told them, because the screen was mostly her own notes and the family did not do briefings. "Here's the shape of it. Casa Corvina, eighteen years old, give or take. Before that — nothing. The building was a derelict shell the town couldn't afford to fix, and then a woman with money nobody can source bought it, restored it properly, and opened the most exclusive room in this half of Europe. Michelin people come. A sultan came. The clientele is the kind that doesn't get written about, which is the kind that pays the most."

"And the Contesa?" Vanessa asked.

"Is not a Contesa." Aiko's mouth did something dry. "There's no title. There's no lineage. There's no *her,* not before Sighișoara — the name she uses now attaches to nothing earlier than the day she bought the building. She walked into this town eighteen years ago fully formed, with a fortune and a face and a perfect story, and she has been selling the perfect story ever since." She finally looked up, and met Vanessa's eyes, and there was a warning in it that was also, fractionally, an apology, because she knew exactly what she was

describing and to whom. "She invented herself. Completely. And she did it *well.*"

Vanessa was very still, and very pleased, and trying not to show the second thing.

"So she's me," she said softly.

"She's *a* you. A local you. A you who stayed in one place and got *comfortable.*" Aiko shut the laptop. "And there's one thing I can't get, which bothers me more than all the things I can. The staff. The young women who work in that house — and it's all young women, beautiful ones, the kind who hold doors and run on timers." She let that land; she'd seen Vanessa's face when she'd come down the hill, and Vanessa had told her about the clipboard girl in three sentences and an expression. "I can find the Contesa's wine supplier and her tax structure and the name of the man who waxes her floors. I cannot find a single one of those girls. No names. No socials. No before. They're as invented as she is, except *she* did hers on purpose and theirs feels—" Aiko searched for it, and didn't like the word she found, and used it anyway. "—done *to* them."

Silence, for a moment. Down in the kitchen Rodica banged another pot.

"Okay," said Tatum, carefully, into the quiet — Tatum, who was always the one who said the thing the family was circling. "I want to say the boring thing now, and I want everyone to remember I'm the one who said it." She looked around at them. "We came here so Vanessa could *rest.* She stood in a graveyard yesterday and said she didn't want to think about a single serious thing. That was *yesterday.* And now there's a card on the table and a hum in her voice and Aiko's already pulled a thread." She turned to Vanessa, and her voice was gentle, not accusing. "You promised yourself ten empty days. You're three days in. Is this dinner, or is this a wreck wearing dinner's clothes?"

Everyone looked at Vanessa.

It was, she would reflect, a fair question, and the fairness of it was annoying. She crossed to the window — the great gold view, the lower town, the one tasteful light not yet lit against the failing afternoon — and she was quiet long enough that Jordan, who had not said a word the entire time, who had simply leaned in the kitchen doorway with his arms folded and watched her the way he watched a

structure, finally spoke.

"It's dinner," he said.

Vanessa turned, surprised.

"It's dinner," Jordan repeated, evenly, "because you haven't seen anything yet. You've seen a beautiful woman who invented herself and some girls who don't photograph. That's not a reason. That's a *smell.*" He pushed off the doorframe. "You taught me the difference between a smell and a reason in our first month. We don't wreck on a smell. We go to dinner, we keep our hands in our laps, and if there's a reason up that hill, the reason will show itself, because reasons always do. And if there *isn't*—" he picked up the cream card, looked at the funeral line, and almost smiled, "—then we had a very good meal in a beautiful house, and you got your holiday after all. Either way, we go as guests. Not as wreckers. Guests."

Vanessa looked at him with the particular warmth she reserved for the handful of times a year he out-thought her in front of an audience.

"Hands in our laps," she agreed.

"Hands in our laps."

"*I'm* not promising that," said Linnéa.

"*Linnéa.*"

"I'm promising to *try.* That's my final offer and it's generous."

So it was settled, in the way things were always settled in that family — by Vanessa wanting and the rest of them arranging the terms of the wanting — and two evenings later, dressed for a funeral they intended to enjoy, the five of them climbed the hill in the blue dark while the lower town did its cheap pretty haunting below, and came at last to the gray stone house with no fangs on it, where the small bronze plaque whispered *by invitation* beside a door that, as they reached it, swung open before anyone could knock.

The clipboard girl stood in the warm light within, smiling her punctual smile.

"She's been so looking forward to you," the girl said. "All of you. Please. Come inside before the dark gets in with you."

And they went in.

Chapter 7

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Seven — The Genuine Article

There was no fog machine.

That was the first thing, and it told you everything. Inside Casa Corvina there were no fangs, no lasers, no wolf howling off a four-second loop. There was a long vaulted hall of bare gray stone, lit entirely by candles — real ones, dozens, in old iron — and a fire of actual logs in a hearth a man could have stood up in, and a table laid for six in linen and pewter and glass so old it had gone faintly violet. The dark in the corners was not switched on. It was simply there, the way it had been there for six hundred years, patient and complete, and it made the manufactured dark down the hill look like exactly what it was: children frightening themselves on purpose.

"Oh," said Linnéa, very quietly, stopped just inside the door. "Oh, she's *good.*"

"She's good," Vanessa agreed, and said nothing else, because she was already counting.

She counted four girls. The clipboard girl, who had let them in; two more carrying wine and water who moved like the same girl filmed twice; and a fourth at the edge of the firelight, perfectly still, waiting to be needed. All young. All lovely. All in the charcoal palette. All wearing the punctual smile that arrived and left on a schedule. None of them spoke. The hall was full of the small sounds of service — pewter, fire, the breath of the candles — and not one human word from any of the four, and after about a minute the silence of them became, to anyone listening for it, louder than the fire.

Aiko was listening for it. Her eyes had gone around the room once, fast — exits, the girls, the single discreet door behind the hearth that the girls came and went through — and then settled, and did not settle again.

"You found the dark," said the Contesa, coming down the hall to meet them, magnificent in something black and architectural, her silver streak catching the candles. "Most people, when they come up the hill, they are disappointed for the first ten seconds. No vampire jumps out.

And then they understand they are standing in the actual thing the vampire is a cartoon of, and they go very quiet, the way you have gone quiet, and they never make the cartoon mistake again." She spread her hands to the hall. "Welcome. Sit. Tonight you eat what the people who built this town ate when the snow closed the passes and there was nothing to do but survive until spring and tell each other terrible stories about the woods."

They sat. The Contesa put Vanessa at her right hand, of course, and the rest of them down the long table, and the girls began to bring the food — and the food, infuriatingly, was perfect: a clear game broth, then wild mushrooms that tasted of the actual forest, then venison that had been someone's whole long patient afternoon, each thing arriving with a sentence of true history that made you taste it differently. The Contesa performed, and her performance was the meal, and it was genuinely, deeply good.

Linnéa, predictably, did most of the talking, and the Contesa let her, because Linnéa talking was Linnéa charmed and Linnéa charmed was the room relaxing.

"Okay, but the real question," Linnéa said, three courses in, leaning her elbows where Tatum would have stopped her if Tatum hadn't been watching something else, "is do *you* believe it. The vampires. The strigoi, whatever, the real folklore one. You live up here in the actual dark. Have you ever, even once, gone *hm, maybe.*"

"I believe," said the Contesa, amused, "that the people here were not stupid. When they bricked up a grave or put a sickle across a corpse's throat, they were not afraid of a man in a cape. They were afraid of the thing every village is afraid of — that the dead don't *leave.* That something can keep using a person after the person is finished. That you can be kept." She turned her wineglass by the stem. "*That* is the real folklore. Not blood. *Possession.* The terror that you might belong to someone after you are done belonging to yourself."

"That's grim," said Linnéa cheerfully.

"It's *true,*" said the Contesa, and smiled at her — and the smile lasted a half-second past where a smile stops, and in that half-second her eyes went over Linnéa the way they had gone over the venison earlier, a warm and total appraisal, *you would keep beautifully* — and then it was gone, folded back into charm so smoothly that Linnéa herself only felt it as a small cold wrongness somewhere under the sternum, a draft from a door she couldn't see.

But Tatum saw it. Tatum, who said almost nothing all evening, who watched her partner the way the Contesa watched her girls, saw the half-second land on Linnéa and saw exactly what it was, and her face did not change at all, and went very quiet and very flat, and she put her hand on Linnéa's knee under the table, not for comfort. For inventory. *Still here. Still mine. Still free.*

"You have a great many people working tonight," said Jordan.

It was the first thing he'd said since the broth. He said it mildly, looking at the girls, and it was not a compliment, it was a measurement, and the Contesa — who was very good — heard the difference and chose to take it as the compliment it was not.

"My girls," she said warmly. "Aren't they lovely. I train them myself. They come to me with nothing — from the villages, from worse than the villages — and I give them a craft, a house, a way to be *more* than the towns they came from would ever have let them be." She watched Jordan watch them. "People sneer at service. People think to serve is to be small. It is the opposite. To serve *perfectly* is the rarest thing a person can become, and I make them rare." A girl refilled her glass without being asked, and the Contesa thanked the glass, not the girl. "They are devoted to me. You can see it."

"I can see they're very quiet," said Aiko.

The table felt it before it understood it — Aiko had spoken, which Aiko mostly didn't, and her voice was flat and pleasant and her eyes were on the Contesa now, fully, for the first time. And the Contesa looked back at her, and something passed between the two of them that was not what had passed over Linnéa. Over Linnéa it had been appetite. Over Aiko it was recognition, and underneath the recognition something colder — the look of a collector who has walked into a rival's gallery and seen, hung on the wall, the one piece she has wanted her whole life and will never, ever be permitted to own, and resents the wanting, and resents the woman who has it. The Contesa looked at Aiko's terrible clever mind the way she could not look at any of her own girls, because none of her own girls had one, and for just a moment the warmth was gone and what sat behind it was naked and hungry and cold.

"Quiet," the Contesa agreed, softly, holding Aiko's gaze, "is what *finished* looks like. The unfinished ones make noise." She let it sit. Then she turned back to the table at large and the warmth flooded back in like a tide, and the dangerous moment was a dinner party

again.

And in all of it — the appetite over Linnéa, the cold wanting toward Aiko, the long delighted duel of looks with Vanessa at her right hand — her eyes passed over Tatum exactly once, early, for less than a second, and dismissed her. Not cruelly. Simply. The way you glance at the wall to confirm it is a wall. Tatum was not beautiful enough to keep and not clever enough to covet, in the Contesa's accounting, and so she did not exist, and the Contesa never looked at her again.

Tatum noticed.

Tatum noticed that she was the one woman at that table the Contesa had not bothered to price, and she sat with the noticing, quiet, through the cheese and the plum tart, and what she understood — slowly, completely, the way Tatum understood everything — was that she had just learned the most important thing anyone would learn all night. The Contesa did not see people. She saw acquisitions and threats, and everything else was wall. And a woman who saw only acquisitions and threats had, somewhere in that beautiful house, a great many people she had decided were neither.

Near the end, Linnéa — warm with wine and bravado and the chaos that was her gift — leaned toward the clipboard girl, who had come to clear, and did the thing only Linnéa would do, the thing that made her useful, the thing that made people reveal.

"Hey," she said, gently, to the girl, person to person, the way she'd say it to anyone. "What's your name? You've been taking care of us all night and I don't even know your name."

The girl froze.

It was very small. A normal person would not have caught it. But five of the most observant people alive were at that table, and they all caught it: the girl's punctual smile held, but her eyes flicked — fast, instinctive, a needle swinging to north — to the Contesa, asking permission to have a name. And the Contesa, not pausing in her sentence to Vanessa, not even appearing to look, made a small motion with two fingers against the stem of her glass, and the girl's smile widened by exactly the trained amount and she said, "Ana," warmly, and took Linnéa's plate, and was gone through the discreet door behind the hearth.

"Ana," Linnéa said, pleased, to the empty air. "Nice to—"

But the door had already closed, and Tatum's hand was on her knee again, and Linnéa, who felt things in her body before her mind caught up, stopped talking, which she almost never did.

The Contesa rose, then, and the evening was over because she had decided it was over, and she walked them to the great iron-studded door herself, warm and gracious and entirely in command, and pressed Vanessa's hands in both of hers at the threshold.

"Come again before you leave," she said, only to Vanessa, low, the two witches alone for a heartbeat in the doorway while the others filed out into the cold. "I so seldom meet someone who sees the whole house. They all see the candles. You saw the girls." Her dark eyes were fond and certain and altogether without fear. "You and I should talk properly, before your holiday is over. I think we want a great many of the same things."

"I think," said Vanessa, smiling, hands in the Contesa's hands, giving away nothing, "we might."

Then the door of Casa Corvina swung shut behind them with the soft heavy finality of a vault, and the bronze plaque whispered its little whisper, and the five of them stood together in the blue dark at the top of the hill, the cheap red glow of the lower town pulsing below, and for a long moment not one of them said anything at all.

Chapter 8

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Eight — The Good Stuff

They came down the hill in silence, through the cheap pretty haunting — the red wash on the walls, the laser bat stuttering across the Clock Tower, the wolf howling off its rock — and none of it touched them, because they had just spent three hours inside the real thing and the cartoon had nothing left to say to them. Linnéa did not narrate. That, more than anything, was how the others knew.

It held until they were back through Castel Drakula's fang-festooned door, into the warm cluttered light of Rodica's front room, the green stove still ticking with heat, the silly skull lights glowing by the windows. Linnéa got exactly as far as the middle of the room. Then she turned around, and the silence broke out of her all at once.

"I wanted to put her through a window," she said. "I have never wanted to put anyone through a window. I'm a *happy person.* And I sat there eating her perfect venison and the entire time my whole body was screaming *put her through the window.*"

"Sit down," said Tatum quietly. "You're shaking."

"I'm not shaking, I'm *vibrating,* it's different—" Linnéa sat down. She was shaking. "She looked at me. You all saw it. Don't tell me you didn't see it."

"I saw it," said Tatum.

"She looked at me like—" Linnéa groped for it, and her hands did a thing, "—like I was a *coat* she was deciding whether to buy. For one second. And then she put it away and she was charming again and I almost thought I made it up." She looked at Tatum. "Tell me I didn't make it up."

"You didn't make it up," Tatum said. "She priced you. She priced Linnéa, she wanted Aiko, and she looked at me once like I was the wall." She said it flatly, without hurt, laying it on the table like evidence. "That's the whole woman, right there. I've been turning it over the whole way down. She doesn't see people. She sees things she can have, and things that can hurt her, and walls. I was a wall." She

finally let one edge of feeling into it. "And if I'm a wall to her, then those girls in that house, the ones she *can* have — I keep thinking about what you are, to a woman like that, once she's already got you. Once you're not a threat and you're not a new thing to acquire anymore. You're a wall too. You're furniture she paid for."

That landed in the warm room and sat there.

Rodica, who had drifted in from the kitchen with a dishtowel somewhere in the middle of Linnéa's window speech and had been standing very still in the doorway, set the dishtowel down.

"You went to dinner up the hill," she said, "and you came home talking like this."

"We did," said Vanessa, who had not said anything yet. She was in the good chair by the stove, her funeral clothes still on, her face thoughtful and still. "Why? What does talking like this make us?"

Rodica looked at the five of them for a long moment — really looked, the appraiser's look, the same species of look the Contesa had used, except that where the Contesa's had priced them, Rodica's was doing something else, something that ended in her broad face cracking slowly into the most satisfied expression any of them had seen on her yet.

"It makes you," she said, "the first guests in eighteen years who came down off that hill *angry.*" She turned on her heel. "Do not move. Do not say one more clever thing until I am back. I have something, and it is not for tourists, and you have just become not tourists."

She came back with a bottle.

It was unlabeled, dark, the cork sealed with a dab of wax gone soft with age, and she set it down like a relic and put out small glasses and said, "*Vișinată.* The real one. My grandmother's. The cherries that have opinions, four years in the dark with sugar and a little—" she kissed her fingers, "—I do not tell you the little. The welcome shot, the blood, the beetroot, that is for the bus people. *This*—" she poured, and it came out thick and dark red and smelled of the whole orchard, "—this is what I drink when someone has earned it, or when someone has died, and tonight nobody has died, so." She raised her glass. "To guests who get *angry.*"

She also brought, without being asked, the cherries themselves on a dish, and a wedge of hard sheep's cheese, and a basket of the flat

seedy crackers she made herself, and she pulled a chair into the circle and sat down among them with the air of a woman settling in for the best evening she'd had all season, and she said, "Now. Tell me everything. Tell me what you saw. I want to hear it from the people who *saw.*"

And so they told her, and the telling was the debrief, and Rodica drank it in like the vișinată.

Aiko gave her the facts in the flat clipped way she gave everyone facts, and her eyes were still half on her own thoughts even here. "The girls don't have names until she lets them. Linnéa asked one her name and the girl had to *check* — looked right at the Contesa to find out if she was allowed to be a person for a second. Then the Contesa moved two fingers and the girl said 'Ana,' and I'd bet the rack of servers I brought that 'Ana' isn't her name, it's the name she's allowed to give to guests." She turned her glass. "She told us herself, you know. She thought she was selling us her brand. She said the real folklore here was never blood, it was *possession.* Being kept. Belonging to someone after you stop belonging to yourself." A beat. "And then she said the quiet ones are the *finished* ones. The unfinished ones make noise."

"She takes them from nothing," said Rodica, and the satisfaction had gone out of her now; this was the thing under the rivalry, the third ingredient, finally coming out in the warmth and the vișinată. "This is what the town says, and the town says it like it is a *kindness.* Pretty girls from the poor villages, from the orphan places, from worse. No mother, no money, no one to ask after them. She takes them up the hill and she gives them the dresses and the training and the — what did she call it—"

"A craft," said Jordan.

"*A craft.* Yes. And the town says, what a saint, what a benefactor, look how she saves these girls." Rodica's mouth twisted. "And the girls are there, and then there are new girls, and the old ones — you do not see them go. You do not see them in the market, married, with babies, gone off to the city, you do not see them *anywhere.* You just stop seeing that one and start seeing this one. And nobody asks." She looked into her glass. "Because to ask, you must be ready to do something. And it is easier to say *what a saint* and sell your fangs and not look up the hill." She drank. "I look up the hill. I have looked up the hill for eighteen years. But I am one old woman with a mortgage and a bat over my door, and what am I going to do."

The room was quiet again. The stove ticked.

"That's still a smell," Jordan said, at last — gently, because he could see Linnéa's jaw, and because somebody had to be the compass. "Everything you've all said, everything Rodica's saying — I believe every word of it, and it's still a smell, not a reason. We don't *know* what's happening to those girls. We know a frightening woman collects vulnerable young women, controls them completely, and the town looks away. That's monstrous. It's not yet a *thing we can take apart,* because we don't know what the thing *is.*" He looked around the circle, and last of all at Vanessa. "But it's the strongest smell I've ever stood in. So I'll say the part I didn't say at her table. I don't think we leave this town without knowing. Smell or not."

Vanessa had been silent almost the whole time, turning her little glass of dark red in the firelight, watching her family arrive one by one at the place she'd been standing since the doorway at the top of the hill, when the Contesa had taken her hands and said *we want a great many of the same things.*

"She wants to see me again," Vanessa said quietly. "Alone. To talk *properly.* She thinks she's found the only other person in a thousand miles who understands what she does." She set the glass down. "She thinks she's found a friend."

"And has she?" Tatum asked.

Vanessa looked at the cherries, and the cheese, and the crackers Rodica had made with her own hands, and the bottle that was not for sale at any price and had been opened anyway, freely, for people who got angry — the whole warm cluttered genuine article of the room, the thing the woman up the hill sold a cold expensive counterfeit of and called *the genuine article* — and something in her settled, the itch finishing its long quiet work of becoming a decision.

"She's found a witch," Vanessa said. "She just doesn't know yet which kind."

Rodica, who did not entirely follow that, but who understood a turning point when one happened in her front room, refilled every glass to the top. And then she did the thing that none of them expected and that Linnéa would remember longest. She got up, and went to the kitchen, and came back with a scrap of paper and a stub of pencil, and she sat down next to Linnéa, and she wrote — slowly, in a cramped old hand, muttering measurements to herself in Romanian,

crossing one out, arguing with her grandmother's ghost about the *little* she didn't tell — and she pushed the scrap across the table.

"The cherries," Rodica said gruffly. "You asked to marry the recipe. I do not let you marry it. But you can have it." She would not look at Linnéa while she said it. "It is not for sale. So I am not selling it. Eat, all of you. You have a great deal to do, I think, and not on a full glass and an empty plate."

Linnéa held the scrap of paper in both hands like it was made of something that could break, and for the second time that night, she had nothing to say.

Chapter 9

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Nine — The Gift

The collection lived at home — carved stirrers brought back one at a time from everywhere she'd ever worked, a small private museum of places, kept for no one but herself. She traveled only with the newest, the one not yet shelved with the others: a thing she'd bought a few weeks ago on an island where it had rained the entire time. A slim length of dark tropical hardwood, the handle worked into a little crowned head, the long shaft tapering down — past where any stirrer needed to taper — to a clean, patient point, the kind sharpened to reach the last of the sugar at the bottom of a tall glass. She turned it once in the lamplight, considering. Then she slid it into her coat.
"Cocktail stirrer," Jordan said. Not a question.
"From the island," she agreed. "I bring my hosts something from my travels. It's good manners."

He held her eyes for a moment, and then gave her the one hard line, the only one, and the love was all in it.

"No wire," he said.

"No wire."

"You wouldn't wear it."

"I wouldn't wear it." She wrapped her scarf. "I can't read a house through a man in my ear, Jordan. I have to be in it. It has to be able to touch me back."

He nodded slowly, accepting that, because it was true and because it was her.

"Midnight," he said. "If that plaque is still whispering at midnight and you're on the wrong side of the door, I stop being polite." He didn't elaborate. He didn't need to. "Go read your house."

She kissed him, and went up the hill alone, with the gift in her coat, and her five senses open, and the sixth one wider than all of them.

The citadel at night, away from the cheap red glow, was very dark and very old, and she let it be. She did not hurry. She listened to her

own boots on the wet cobbles and the wind working at the eaves and a dog somewhere down in the lower town, and she smelled woodsmoke and stone and the cold mineral breath off the river, and by the time she reached the top of the hill her instrument was fully awake, every needle live, the way it got only a few times a year and only when something was about to be worth it.

The door of Casa Corvina opened before she knocked. Of course it did.

The clipboard girl — Ana, who might not be Ana — stood in the warm candlelight, punctual smile in place. But Vanessa was reading at full power now, and at full power she caught what she'd only half-caught the first time: the smile arrived correctly and the eyes did not come with it, and up close, this close, there was a particular smell on the girl under the woodsmoke and the beeswax. Not perfume. The girl wore no perfume, none of them did, and that was the thing — they all smelled faintly, identically, of the same plain soap, the smell of a place where many people are washed rather than where many people live. An institutional smell. A clean, careful, administered smell, in the most expensive private house in Transylvania.

Vanessa filed it without a flicker, and smiled, and stepped inside.

The Contesa received her alone, in a smaller room than the great hall — a study, intimate, lined with old books and older maps, two chairs by a fire, a decanter already breathing. She was dressed less for performance tonight and more for *intimacy,* which was its own performance, and she rose with both hands out and real pleasure in her face.

"You came back. I confess I wondered if I'd frightened you off. I do that. I'm too much, too fast, with the rare ones — I get greedy." She laughed at herself, charmingly. "Sit. Tell me you came without the gymnast. I adore her, but she's exhausting, and I wanted *you.*"

"I came alone," said Vanessa, and held out the gift.

The Contesa took it, and her whole face lit — genuine delight, the delight of a woman who is given very little and takes very much. She turned it in her fingers, the little crowned head, the long dark tapering shaft, and held the point up to the firelight to admire the carving, and saw a charming foreign trifle, a stirrer, a witty little nothing from a witch's travels, and felt no chill at all.

"It's *exquisite,*" the Contesa said. "Where—"

"An island. It rained the whole time."

"Of course it did. You'd choose somewhere that rained." She crossed to the decanter and poured two glasses of something dark, and — Vanessa watched her do it with a stillness that cost her something — she dropped the little carved point into her own glass and stirred, idly, and tapped it clean on the rim, and set it beside her like a treasure. "There. Christened. I'll keep it on the desk. Now." She sat, and folded herself toward Vanessa, and the intimacy came on like warmth from the fire. "Talk to me properly. I have been so *bored,* and you are not boring, and I want to know what you are."

So they talked, and it was a duel conducted entirely as a seduction, and the Contesa was magnificent at it, and Vanessa — who curated illusions of joy for a living, who could be whatever a room needed her to be — gave her back exactly the kindred spirit she was hunting for, warm and dry and knowing, a fellow connoisseur of the gap between what people are and what they perform. She let the Contesa feel *seen.* It was the one thing the woman could not get from her girls, and she drank it like the vișinată, and the more she drank the more she opened, and the more she opened the more the house told Vanessa the truth.

It told her in sounds. Once, far off through the old thick walls, a door, and then footsteps — many, even, in step, the unmistakable rhythm of people who move when they are moved rather than when they choose — crossing somewhere above, and then a long quiet. The Contesa did not pause. She had stopped hearing it years ago, the way you stop hearing a clock.

It told her in the girls. Twice one came in — to feed the fire, to refill the decanter — and Vanessa read each one at full power as she passed, and what she read was not service and not even fear, exactly, but something underneath fear, on the far side of it: the flat, quiet, conserved stillness of a person who has learned that the self is dangerous to have out where it can be seen, and has put it away somewhere, and may not entirely remember where. Not emptied. *Stored.* Possessed, in the old folkloric sense the Contesa had served them at dinner like a delicacy — still being used after they were finished belonging to themselves.

And it told her, finally, in the thing the Contesa said when she thought she was among her own kind.

"You have one too," the Contesa said. Warm. Confiding. Leaning in.

"The little Japanese one. Don't look like that, I'm not prying — I only mean I *recognized* her, at my table. The way you keep her close. The way she watches the doors." Her dark eyes were soft and certain and utterly without the knowledge that she had just walked off a cliff. "She's a remarkable instrument. I have never seen one with a mind like that — mine are lovely, mine are *finished,* but they were never clever, the clever ones are too much work to keep quiet." She sighed, a collector's sigh. "I'd give a very great deal for one that clever. How *did* you break her so beautifully that she still thinks? You must tell me your method. One keeper to another."

The fire ticked.

Vanessa did not move. Not a muscle, not a breath out of rhythm, not a single needle on her instrument allowed to show on her face. She looked at this woman who believed Aiko was a thing that had been *broken beautifully,* who had asked for her *method,* who wanted to know how you keep a clever woman clever and owned at the same time — and somewhere very deep and very cold, in the place the itch lived, the smell finished becoming a reason.

"It's not a method," Vanessa heard herself say, warm, amused, perfect. "It's patience. You have to want them to stay more than you want to keep them." She lifted her glass. "But you know that. You've kept a whole house."

"I *have,*" the Contesa breathed, delighted to be understood, and toasted her with the glass she had stirred with the gift, and drank.

Vanessa smiled, and drank with her, and stayed exactly long enough afterward that it would not look like leaving, and then she rose and was gracious and let the Contesa press both her hands at the door and say *come again, come again before you go, we have so much more to say,* and she walked back out into the cold and the dark and the real night with her face still arranged and her hands still steady.

She came down the hill at twenty to midnight.

Jordan was in the doorway of the fang-house, where he had been, she understood, the entire time. He took one look at her face — the face she hadn't dropped yet, the face she was holding all the way down the hill so it wouldn't fall off — and he didn't ask *did you get a reason.*

He asked, "How bad."

And Vanessa, who had gone up the hill on a holiday and come down it

a wrecker, said the truest thing her five senses and her sixth had brought back down the hill with her.

"She thinks Aiko is something she could buy," Vanessa said. "And she asked me how I broke her."

Chapter 10

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Ten — The Reason

By morning the whole family knew the shape of it, because Vanessa had said the one sentence in the doorway the night before and then refused to say any more until she'd slept, and you did not push Vanessa when she was holding her face on with both hands.

So they came to breakfast knowing the headline — *she thinks Aiko is something she could buy, and she asked me how I broke her* — and Rodica, who did not yet know anything, served papanași and coffee into a silence with a different weather than yesterday's, and had the sense, for once, not to fill it.

It was Aiko who broke it. She'd been quiet, turning her coffee, and when she spoke her voice was flat and even and aimed straight at Vanessa.

"How did you answer her."

Everyone looked up.

"It matters," Aiko said, to the table generally, still flat. "She asked Vanessa how she broke me. I want to know what Vanessa said back." Her eyes hadn't left Vanessa. "Word for word."

Vanessa set down her cup. "I said it wasn't a method. I said it was patience." She held Aiko's gaze, and something in her own face was very careful. "I said you have to want them to stay more than you want to keep them."

The table went quiet in a new way.

Because it was the perfect cover — kindred to kindred, exactly what a fellow keeper would say — and it was also, sitting there in the morning light over the doughnuts, simply *true,* the truest description of this strange lethal family anyone had ever said out loud, said to a monster as a lie and landing on all of them as a fact. Aiko absorbed it. You could see her absorb it. Then she did what Aiko did with anything that got too close to the center of her, which was reach for the driest possible joke and hold it up like a shield.

"So you admit it," Aiko said. "You broke me." A beat, deadpan, perfect. "*Ma'am.*"

It cracked the table open. Linnéa barked a laugh into her coffee; even Jordan's mouth moved.

"That is *exactly,*" said Tatum, gravely, buttering a roll, "how I broke my little Swedish meatball."

"I am *not* a meatball—" Linnéa started.

"You are a *delicious* and *fully broken* meatball, and you follow me from country to country—"

"I follow you because you have the *passports* and the *good sense,* it's a *division of labor*—"

"She trained me," Tatum confided to Rodica, who had stopped pouring entirely and was watching this exchange with the expression of a woman recalculating everything she thought she'd understood about her tenants. "Years of patience. Now she does tricks."

"I do *not* do—" Linnéa caught herself, glared, ate a furious bite of papanași. "I do excellent tricks and I resent that they're being weaponized at breakfast."

And the family laughed, warm and dark and entirely themselves — and that was the moment, with the laughter still in the air, that Aiko set the joke down and picked up the real thing, in the same flat voice, no transition at all.

"I can call her Ma'am," Aiko said, "because I picked her." The table stilled. "I picked all of you. I packed up my whole life in Tokyo and I *chose* this, every day, and the proof that I chose it is that I get to make the joke." She turned her coffee cup a half-turn on the saucer. "Those girls up that hill can't make the joke. One of them had to look at that woman and get *permission* to tell Linnéa a name. That's the whole thing, right there. That's the entire difference between me and them, and she can't see it, because to her there isn't one. To her we're the same — kept is kept." She looked up, and for once the dryness was all the way gone. "She asked Vanessa for the *recipe.* Like we're the same."

Nobody said anything. Rodica had put the coffee pot down.

Jordan had been silent the whole meal, the way he was silent,

watching, weighing, the brakeman who two nights ago had sat in that same chair and said *it's just dinner, hands in our laps, we don't wreck on a smell.* He set down his cup now, and the small sound of it on the saucer was somehow the loudest thing in the room.

"It's not a smell anymore," he said.

That was all. He didn't make a speech; he never did. But everyone at the table understood what it cost the one person who'd held the line to be the one who now took it down, and what it meant that *he* was the one who said it — that the permission came from the man who'd spent two days refusing to give it. The holiday was over. He'd called it himself.

Vanessa looked at him with that particular warmth, and then she looked around the table at her family, and she said the rest of it — the part that made this one different, the part she'd been turning over since the hill.

"Here's the trouble," she said. "For years, every wreck had a marriage in it — a thing built on a lie, and we'd find the lie and widen it until the whole thing came down. That was the craft, for a long time." She turned last night over in her mind, the point of it, the woman swirling her wine. "Lately that's changed. Cairo wasn't a marriage. The monsoon wasn't. But there was always still a *lie* we could pull — a man who'd built something on rot, and we'd find the rot and lean on it." She let it sit. "Up that hill there's no marriage, and there's no lie. She's not pretending to be anything. She *tells* you what she is, over dinner, like a wine list. There's just a woman, a house, and twenty girls who don't get to have names. There's nothing to widen."

And there it was, named, sitting on the breakfast table next to the cherries.

"So what do we do," said Tatum quietly — Tatum, always the one who asked the true next question.

"We don't break a marriage this time," Vanessa said. "We empty a house." She picked up her coffee. "We go slow. We go careful. We find out exactly what's in that house and exactly how she holds them, because you don't pull people out of a thing until you understand the thing, or you get them killed being clever. Aiko works the edges. I work the woman. Nobody goes near those girls until we know what taking one *costs* them."

The plan, such as it was, settled over the table. And then everyone,

slowly, looked at Rodica.

Rodica had not moved in some time. She stood by the green stove with the coffee pot cooling in her hand, and her broad face had gone through several countries of feeling while she listened, and what it had arrived at, finally, was something Vanessa recognized and almost flinched from, because it was eighteen years deep.

"You are going to do something," Rodica said. It was not quite a question. "About the hill."

The table was very quiet.

"You don't have to be part of this," Jordan said — gently, and first, before Vanessa could speak, because this was the part that was his. "In fact I'd rather you weren't. The less you know, the safer you are when it's over and we're gone and you still have to live in this town. You've fed us and you've been kind and you gave Linnéa your grandmother's cherries, and the cleanest thing — the thing that protects *you* — is for you to have served some strange tourists breakfast and noticed nothing."

Rodica looked at him for a long moment.

Then she set the coffee pot down on the stove, and pulled out the chair she'd sat in two nights before when she brought out the real vișinată, and she sat down among them, slowly, the way a woman sits down when she has decided something she cannot un-decide.

"Eighteen years," she said, "I look up that hill. Eighteen years I tell myself, what can I do, I am one old woman, I have a mortgage, I have a bat over my door. Eighteen years I sell the fangs and I do not ask where the girls go." Her hands were flat on the table. "You think the clean thing is I notice nothing. The clean thing is for *you.* For me, all the clean I have left is dirty." She looked around at them, this strange family who had come down off the hill angry. "I am not a soldier. I am sixty-one and my knees are worse than the meatball's. But I have lived in this town forty years, I know which girls came from where, I know who on that hill can be bought and who is too frightened, and I know the night the whole town will be looking the other way." Her chin came up. "It is in two days. They call it Halloween."

Nobody spoke.

"So," said Rodica, and reached for the coffee pot again, because some

part of her would always be the landlady, "you tell me what an old woman who notices everything is worth to you. And then somebody pour me what's left of my own cherries, because I think I have just joined a *coven,* and I would like a drink."

Chapter 11

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Eleven — What It Costs

By noon the fang-house had become something else.

It still had the skull lights in the windows and the bat over the door and the basket of sanitized teeth, but in among all of it the family had quietly built an operation: Aiko's four monitors moved out of the staff room onto the long front-room table, cables taped down the flagstones, the silent vampire film over the stove switched off for the first time since they'd arrived. Rodica had hung a CLOSED — PRIVATE EVENT sign on the door and turned away two separate tour groups with a ferocity that suggested she'd been waiting eighteen years to turn someone away on that hill's account.

Outside, two days out, the town was building toward its own night — extra fog machines being tested in the square, a man on a ladder stringing more lights, a delivery of pumpkins that had no business in Transylvania. The fake haunting ramped up while the family planned a real one, and the irony was not lost on any of them, least of all Vanessa, who stood at the window watching a teenager duct-tape a rubber bat to a lamppost and said, "Two days. We have two days to do the most careful thing we've ever done, and we have to do it fast, which is the one way you are guaranteed to do a careful thing badly."

"So we don't do it badly," said Jordan, from the table. "Aiko. Tell them what you found, because it changes the whole problem."

Aiko did not look up from the monitors. She'd been at them since before dawn; there was a cold cup of coffee at her elbow that no one had dared remove.

"I got into Casa Corvina last night," she said. "Took about an hour. Her security's expensive and stupid, which is the most expensive kind." A few keystrokes. "The business is clean on top. Spotless. A boutique hospitality company, a registered charitable foundation attached — the *Corvina Foundation,* which 'rescues vulnerable young women from rural poverty and institutional care and trains them in hospitality.' The town's right. On paper she's a saint. There are *grants.* There are *awards.*" Her voice was very flat. "And then I went looking for the girls themselves, the way I did before, and I

found the same thing I found before, except now I understand it." She finally turned around. "They don't exist."

"You said that before," said Linnéa. "No socials, no—"

"Not *I can't find them.*" Aiko's eyes were steady. "*They don't exist.* She takes them from places where a person is already barely on paper — village girls, orphanage girls, girls whose mothers are dead and whose fathers are gone, girls one clerk's shrug from being no one. And then she finishes the job. Whatever thin little thread of documentation each of them had — a birth record, an orphanage file, an ID — it's gone. Edited out. I can see the *holes,* the places in the registries where someone very good went in and closed a person up like a wound." She let that sit, and did not embellish it. "She doesn't just keep them. She *unmakes* them. By the time a girl has been up that hill a year, there is no girl. There's no record she was ever born. There's nothing to report missing, because officially there was never anyone there."

The front room was quiet. Out in the square, the wolf howl started its four-second loop.

"That's the cage," said Jordan slowly. "Not a lock. A *hole.* You can't walk a girl out the door, because the second she's outside she's a woman with no name, no papers, no country, in a town that belongs to the woman who erased her. Where does she go? To the police? They're bought, and there's no *her* to make a report about. Across a border? With what passport?" He shook his head. "We could open every door in that house tonight and we wouldn't be freeing anyone. We'd be turning twenty erased women loose into a country that has no record they're alive. That's not rescue. That's just a different kind of disappearing."

"It's Cairo," Aiko said, "backwards." She said it quietly, almost to herself. "There, I emptied a man out of every system until he didn't exist. It took weeks." A pause. "She did this to twenty women, one at a time, over eighteen years. And to undo it — to put twenty people *back* into existence well enough that they can stand at a border and be real — fast, clean, before anyone up that hill notices the records moving—" She turned back to the screens. "That's the hardest thing anyone's ever asked me to do. And I have two days."

"Then you'd better stop talking to us," said Vanessa, gently, and Aiko almost smiled, and went back to work.

Rodica had been sitting very still through all of it, her big hands flat on the table, and now she spoke, and what came out was the eighteen years.

"The foundation," she said. "I know the foundation. There is a children's home, two valleys over, very poor, and the Corvina Foundation is its great benefactor, everyone knows, the Contesa pays for the roof, the heat, the food. And every year or two, a girl who is about to age out — sixteen, seventeen, no family, nowhere — the foundation 'sponsors' her. A place at Casa Corvina. A future. The home is *grateful.*" Her mouth twisted. "I know this because nine years ago a girl came down off that hill. One time. The only one I ever saw come down. She came to my kitchen door at night, in the rain, no shoes, and she did not have enough words left in her to say what she needed, she had been quiet so long. And I gave her soup and I was *afraid,* God forgive me, afraid of what it would cost me, this town, my little house — and I told her to wait while I thought, and I went to telephone someone I trusted." She stopped. Her hands had closed into fists. "And when I came back from the telephone she was gone. Back up the hill, I think. Frightened back. Or taken. I never saw her again, and I never saw her name in any paper, and I told myself I had imagined how bad it was, because the other thing was unbearable." She looked up at them. "So when you ask me what it costs to take one out — I know. It costs everything, and it has to be done *all the way,* or they go back, because back is the only place that knows their face."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Tatum reached over and put her hand on Rodica's fist, and Rodica let her.

"That's the real problem," Tatum said quietly — and this was Tatum's, the thing she'd been circling since the dinner table where the Contesa had looked through her like a wall. "It's not the papers. Aiko can do the papers, if anyone can. It's that girl at your door, who didn't have enough words left. You can hand a woman a passport and a door and a car, and if she's been taught for ten years that the outside is worse and that she is nothing and that leaving is death — she won't walk through it. Or she'll walk through it and walk right back, because back is the only place that knows her face. That's what the Contesa really built. Not a locked house. *Women who lock themselves.*" She looked around the table. "We don't just have to open the cage. In two days, we have to make twenty women who've been taught they don't exist believe, all at once, on a night full of strangers in masks, that there's a real person worth walking out *as.* And that's not papers. That's not Aiko. That's—"

"That's the wreck," said Vanessa.

She'd turned from the window, and her face had the look it got when the shape of a thing finally resolved — not the itch anymore, not even the reason, but the *work,* clear and cold and entirely hers.

"That's exactly the wreck," she said again. "We've spent years learning how to walk into a person's head and change what they believe about their own life. We did it to break people. Fine. Here's a house full of women who've had one woman living in their heads for years telling them they're nothing and the door is death." She came to the table. "We don't pick the lock. We do what we do. We get in there, and we out-talk the voice that's already in there, and we give every one of those girls a truer story about herself than the one she's been kept on — fast, and quiet, and all of them at once — so that when the door opens on Halloween, they don't have to be *carried* through it. They *run.*"

"And the papers," said Jordan.

"Aiko makes them real on paper." Vanessa's eyes were bright and terrible. "I make them believe they're real. Rodica gives us the home, the names, the faces, the road out. Tatum, you and Linnéa find me every soft point in that house — every girl who still has noise left in her, because the noisy ones go first, they bring the quiet ones." She finally let herself smile, and it was not a nice smile, it was the working one. "She invited me back. She wants her one friend in a thousand miles. So I'm going to go back up that hill and let the loneliest woman in Transylvania give me a tour of her entire cage, room by room, because she cannot *wait* to be seen." The smile thinned. "And while she's showing the witch her treasures, the witch is going to count the doors."

Outside, the wolf howled, on its loop, into a square filling with rubber bats and fog.

Inside, the coven got to work.

Chapter 12

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Twelve — The Polishing

It was Linnéa who said it first, the way she said most things first.

"I'm the bait."

They were around the long table in the fang-house, the monitors glowing, the map of the operation still half-shaped between them. Linnéa wasn't asking. She was already up, already moving, the restlessness of the last two days finally pointed at a target.

"She wanted me," Linnéa went on. "At the dinner. I felt it on my skin like a wet hand. So we *give* her what she wants — a wild girl her fancy friend can't be bothered to finish — and she pulls me in close. And close," she spread her hands, "is where you count things. I walk into that house as a present, and I walk out with the map."

"And how," said Vanessa carefully, "do you walk out?"

That stopped the room a little, because it was the wrong person asking. Vanessa was the one who walked toward dangerous things; Vanessa was the one the rest of them talked *down.* And here she was, arms folded, looking at Linnéa with something that was not enthusiasm.

"I'm serious," Vanessa said. "It's a beautiful idea and I hate it. Walk me through the back half, not the front. She takes you in. She likes you. Then what? You're inside a house that *removes women,* playing a woman she's allowed to remove, and the second she decides she'd rather keep you than discuss terms with me, what is your way out of that house?"

"I'm not exactly helpless, Vanessa." A flash of the old grin. "Ten years of—"

"I know what you can do to a person in a room. I've seen it." Vanessa's voice stayed level. "I'm asking what you do against a house full of her people, on her hill, in her town, where the police belong to her and there's no record you ever went up. Being able to put one woman on the floor doesn't get you off that hill. It gets you a much worse

afternoon."

The room was quiet. Linnéa's grin faded, not into fear, but into respect — she heard that Vanessa wasn't doubting her courage. She was doing the thing Jordan did, the thing that kept them all alive: looking for the wall that would fail.

It was Tatum who answered, and she answered by solving it.

"She doesn't take me seriously," Tatum said.

Everyone looked at her. She'd been quiet, as she usually was, turning a coffee cup, and now she set it down.

"At the dinner. She looked at me exactly once and filed me under *wall.* Didn't price me, didn't watch me, decided I was nothing and never looked again." Tatum's voice was even and certain. "That's the most useful thing anyone's handed us all week, and I've been sitting on it. She won't watch the furniture. So I'm the furniture. Linnéa goes in as the present — and I go in as the dull little woman who carries the present's bag. The handler. I keep my eyes down, I never leave her floor of the house, and I am Linnéa's way out, because I'll be standing right there the whole time and *the Contesa will have agreed to it,* because she's already decided I don't matter." She looked at Vanessa. "You wanted to know the way out. I'm the way out. You hand her the thing she's hungry for in one hand, and you slip me in behind it because she's too proud to look at the other hand."

Vanessa was quiet for a long moment, turning it over — and the others watched her do it, watched her weigh the people she loved against the twenty she'd never met, watched her hate it and respect it at the same time.

"No wire," Jordan said into the silence, because the cost had to be spoken out loud before Vanessa could say yes to it. "Aiko's building twenty human beings out of nothing in two days; she cannot also sit in your ear. And a wire on a woman walking into *that* house is a noose — if it's found, you don't get arrested, you get *erased,* same as the girls, and we never find you, because there's no record you were ever there to find." He let it land. "So you go in clean. No voice in your ear. No cavalry waiting in a van. If it goes wrong inside, the only person who can move is Tatum — and Tatum can't move without burning the whole thing and both of you with it. That's the real plan. I want everyone looking straight at it."

"I'm looking at it," said Linnéa, quietly, and there was no joke in it,

which was how they all knew she meant it.

"Tatum," Vanessa said. "You too. You understand that if it goes wrong, you might have to stand in a room and *watch* it go wrong, and keep your eyes down, and do nothing, because doing something gets you both disappeared instead of one of you."

Something moved behind Tatum's calm face — the full weight of what she was volunteering for, which was worse than danger; it was the obligation of *stillness* over someone she loved. "I understand it better than anyone here," she said. "That's exactly why it has to be me holding the rope and not one of you. I'm the only one of us who can watch Linnéa in trouble and not move. I've spent years learning when not to move." She reached over and took Linnéa's hand on the tabletop, not for comfort — for inventory. "I can do the hard version of love. The one that holds still."

Vanessa looked at the two of them, hands joined on the table, and then at Jordan, who gave her nothing, because this was hers to decide.

"All right," she said at last, and the word cost her something. "All right. We do it your way. But the terms are mine, and they aren't negotiable: I get you back *out* of that house tonight, both of you, before dark settles. She doesn't get to keep you 'a few days' to start your *finishing,* she doesn't get you overnight, she gets an *afternoon* and the promise of a conversation. If she pushes to keep you, I pull rank as the seller and I walk us all out, and we find another way in. The moment it stops being a visit and starts being a *delivery,* it's over." She looked hard at Linnéa. "And if I give you the word — any word, I'll make it stupid so you can't miss it — you stop being brave and you follow me to the door. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Linnéa.

"Agreed," said Tatum.

"Then God help the loneliest woman in Transylvania," Vanessa said, and reached for her coat. "Because we're going to go let her show off."

They went up the hill in the long gold light of the afternoon — Vanessa in front, gracious and unhurried; Linnéa a half-step behind, dressed to be looked at, all that platinum brightness in a town of gray stone; and Tatum last of all, carrying the bag, eyes down, soft and

unremarkable and already, by some private act of will, gone invisible.

The Contesa met them at the door of Casa Corvina lit from within like a holiday.

"You *brought* her." She breathed it. And she did not, after the first half-second of courtesy, look at Vanessa at all, because all of her had gone to Linnéa. "Oh, you generous, generous woman. You actually brought her to me."

"You admired her so." Vanessa let a fond, conspiratorial weariness into it, one keeper indulging another. "And honestly, darling, she's wasted on me. I keep the quiet ones — the still ones, the finished ones. The wild ones bore me by Tuesday and exhaust me by Thursday." She gestured at Linnéa the way one presents a horse one is tired of stabling. "But you. You're the finisher. I thought — let the master have a proper look. Decide if she's worth your trouble before we ever talk price."

"Come into the light," the Contesa said to Linnéa, ignoring Vanessa entirely now, and Linnéa came, chin up, and let herself be brought to the center of the candlelit hall and *looked at.*

And the Contesa looked at her the way she looked at everything she wanted — slowly, completely, with the unhurried entitlement of a woman appraising a piece she has already half-decided to buy.

She walked a slow circle. She took in the platinum hair, almost white in the candlelight, and the line of Linnéa's throat, and then — with a connoisseur's attention, cataloguing, pricing — the *body* the wild girl had been so carelessly given. Not the soft, decorative loveliness of her own house girls; something else, something the Contesa clearly hungered for precisely because she had never owned its like. The sculpted breadth of Linnéa's shoulders under the thin bright fabric, the kind of shoulders a decade of rings and bars had carved and that no soft girl ever grew. The long flat plane of her back tapering to a waist, the muscle moving underneath when she shifted her weight, controlled, coiled, *strong.* The thighs of an athlete, the calves, the way she stood balanced on the balls of her feet without seeming to, as though the floor were something she was only briefly agreeing to. A faint pale seam of old scar at one knee — a story, a history, a thing that had been *used.* The Contesa's gaze moved over all of it the way a hand would, taking inventory, and her lips parted very slightly.

"*Look* at you," she said softly, almost to herself. "All this

engineering. Years of someone making you into a machine for being looked at, and then nobody had the wit to *aim* you." She reached out and, with one finger, turned Linnéa's jaw toward the light, the better to see her, and Linnéa let her, every loud and living thing in her bitten down to nothing behind her teeth. "My girls are lovely. They're *flowers.* But you — you're *architecture.* Do you know how rare it is, to find a body that someone already spent ten years disciplining, and find the *person* inside it still completely wild? That's the whole gift. Someone else did all the breaking of the body. I only have to break the girl." She smiled, and it was warm, and it was terrible. "And there's so much of you to break. Such a *fire.* A fire like this wants a grate, sweetheart. It wants walls. Burning out in the open like this, warming no one — what a waste. What a waste."

Linnéa held still. Held still the way she'd learned to weaponize it. Said nothing. And only Tatum, setting the bag down soundlessly by the wall, eyes lowered, would have seen the single muscle that jumped in her partner's jaw and known it for what it was — not fear. *Rage,* held on a leash so short it was its own act of violence.

The Contesa finally tore herself away and remembered her manners, and her gaze flicked, once, to Tatum — the woman by the wall, the bag-carrier, the dull soft nothing.

"And this?"

"Her handler," Vanessa said, with a wave that dismissed Tatum to the realm of luggage. "Manages her practicals so I needn't. Dull as a wet Tuesday — ignore her, she's part of the freight. She'll stand wherever you put her and bore the walls."

"Mm," said the Contesa, already not looking, already filing Tatum back under *nothing* and locking the drawer — and just like that, the most dangerous person in the house was standing inside it, holding the only rope, and the woman who'd built the cage had personally agreed not to see her.

What followed, the Contesa called *getting acquainted,* and Vanessa called, privately, the tour she'd climbed the hill for.

The Contesa walked them through Casa Corvina like a proud chatelaine, and within minutes Vanessa understood, reading at full power, that she was being shown the *performance* and not the house — the beautiful front rooms, the candlelit hall, the girls gliding through as flawless, silent staff, every door that mattered staying

closed. The Contesa was careful even in her vanity. So Vanessa did what she'd come to do: she counted. The door behind the great hearth that the girls came and went through. The stair that went up, where she'd heard the even footsteps cross the first night. The corridor that turned once and did not come back. She filed each one, murmuring admiration, letting the Contesa feel deliciously *seen* by the one peer in a thousand miles, while underneath the warm noise she built the map she'd come for.

And Tatum, freight, *drifted.* A handler tidying her mistress's wake — righting a chair, retrieving Linnéa's dropped wrap, invisible — drifted three steps deeper into each room than anyone troubled to watch, and read what Vanessa couldn't from the front of the parade: which girls' eyes lifted and which never did; which one went rigid at a raised voice and which had stopped going rigid long ago; the locked stair; the count of place-settings laid in a far room for a great many more people than were ever seen. She found the door-girl — Ana — refilling a decanter in an alcove, and passing close, furniture to furniture, Tatum let her own lowered eyes come up for half a second, just to her, just once: *I see you. You're real. I see you.* The girl's hand trembled on the crystal — the smallest treason — before the trained stillness came down over it again like a shutter. Tatum filed it and moved on. *That one still has noise left.*

Then the Contesa, glowing, replete with being admired, turned and put a proprietary hand at the small of Linnéa's back.

"Now," she said, warm and certain. "Enough parading. Let your dull woman bore my friend with the wine list a while. You and I, fire — " and her fingers spread, just slightly, against Linnéa's spine, "— you and I are going to go somewhere quiet and *get to know each other.*"

And she steered Linnéa toward one of the doors Vanessa had counted — the one behind the hearth, the one the girls disappeared through — and Linnéa went, chin up, playing the wild thing intrigued despite herself, and across the hall Tatum set down a glass with hands that did not shake because she would not permit them to, and lowered her eyes, and could not follow, because furniture does not follow.

The door closed behind the two of them.

And the rope went taut.

Chapter 13

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Fourteen — Stillness

The room behind the hearth was quiet, and the quiet was the first wrong thing.

Linnéa had braced for a great many things on the way through that door — a cell, restraints, some apparatus, the cruelty the rest of the house's beauty was paying for. What she found instead was a small warm sitting room, lamplit, a low couch, a fire, a tray with two cups already poured and steaming, and a quiet so deep and so deliberately built — thick walls, heavy drapes, a carpet that drank every footstep — that the noise of the whole bright performing house simply *stopped* at the threshold and did not follow her in. The fog machines, the wolf on its loop, the murmur of the hall: gone. Just the fire, and the small sounds of it, and the Contesa closing the door with a soft, final click.

"There," the Contesa said, and let out a long contented breath, the breath of a woman taking off shoes that had pinched all day. "Listen to that. Nothing. No one wanting anything from you. Sit."

Linnéa sat, because a wild girl being courted would sit, and because every instinct she had was screaming and she needed her face to be doing none of it.

She told herself it was a room. She told herself the most dangerous thing in it was the woman, and she could put the woman through a wall in under two seconds if it came to that, and she catalogued the exits — the door they'd come in, a second door half-curtained at the back — the way Tatum had taught her, and she held all of it in the front of her mind like a shield.

The Contesa sat down beside her, close, turned toward her, and looked at her with an attention so total and so kind it was almost unbearable, and began, very gently, to take her apart.

"You don't stop," the Contesa said. It wasn't a question. "Do you. Ever. I watched you the whole way through my house — talking, moving, that bright loud brave face, on and on, and I thought, *this poor creature has not been allowed to stop since she was a child.*" A small,

knowing smile. "The gymnast. Of course. They start you at, what, four? Five? And from then on it is the floor, the bars, the beam, the *room* — always performing, always *on,* always the brightest thing, because the second you stop being the brightest thing in the room, someone marks you down. Yes?" Her voice was low and warm and certain. "You learned before you could read that the worst thing you can be is *still.* That stillness is where they catch you. Where they judge you. Where you lose."

Linnéa kept her face soft and faintly amused. *She's good,* she told herself. *She's just good. This is the patter. She does it to all of them.* But something cold had begun, low in her stomach, because it was not the patter. It was specific. It was *her.*

"And so you became the loudest one," the Contesa went on, softer now, leaning in. "The funniest. The most. You fill every room before anyone can ask you to be smaller. You make them laugh so they never look too close. You move so fast and so brightly that no one — not your friends, not your dull little handler out there, not anyone — ever sees the thing you have never once in your life said out loud." Her dark eyes were very steady on Linnéa's. "Which is that you are *so tired.* That somewhere under all that fire, the truest wish you have, the one you'd never admit because admitting it feels like dying — is to be allowed to *stop.* To put it down. To be still, and held in place, and not have to hold yourself up for one single hour. To let someone else be the wall, so you can finally lean."

The cold in Linnéa's stomach became something else.

Because it was *true.*

It was the truest thing anyone had ever said to her, and she had never told it to a living soul, had barely told it to herself, had buried it so deep under handstands and bravado and bright noise that she'd half-convinced herself it wasn't there — and this woman, this monster, this stranger she'd known for two days had reached straight down through all of it on the first try and closed her hand around the one secret at the very bottom of Linnéa Bergström like she'd always known exactly where it was kept.

How. The word went off in Linnéa like an alarm. *How does she know that. Nobody knows that. I don't even—*

"There it is," the Contesa breathed, watching her face, delighted, tender, terrible. "There. I saw it move behind your eyes. Don't be

frightened. It's the most natural thing in the world. The loud ones are always the most tired — it's the loud ones who want the stillness most, and hate themselves for wanting it. My girls came to me like that, every one. So tired of being whatever the world needed. And I gave them the one thing no one else ever offered." Her hand came up, slowly, and touched Linnéa's jaw — not turning it this time, just resting there, warm, the way you'd cup something precious. "I gave them permission to stop. To be still. To be *kept,* so they never had to choose or perform or hold themselves up again. You have no idea, fire, what a *mercy* that is to someone who's been performing since she was four. They weep with relief. Every one of them, in the end, weeps with relief."

And the horror — the real horror, the one Linnéa would not have words for, for a long time — was not the hand on her jaw, and not the locked house, and not the danger.

It was that some deep and exhausted animal part of her, some part worn to the bone by a lifetime of being too much, *leaned toward the hand.*

Just slightly. Just for a breath. The pull was real. It came up out of the buried place like water finding a crack and it said, in a voice that was horribly her own: *yes. Yes. To stop. To be still. To not have to be the brightest thing for one single hour. To let someone else be the wall.* It was not a threat she was resisting. It was an *offer,* aimed with perfect cruelty at the exact center of the one hunger she'd spent her whole life pretending she didn't have, and for one endless, vertiginous breath Linnéa Bergström — who feared nothing, who put men through windows, who had never met a room she couldn't fill — wanted, with her whole secret heart, to say *yes.*

And in that breath the worst thing of all happened: she lost the line.

She had come in here to *perform* a small yielding. To give the predator a believable flinch of temptation and no more — acting, controlled, the wild girl pretending to feel the pull. But the pull was real now, the real thing and the performance had bled into each other, and for one black moment Linnéa genuinely could not tell which yes was rising in her — the false one she was supposed to give, or the true one she was supposed to be guarding against — and she understood, falling, that this was *exactly* how it happened. This was the machine. Not bars. Not drugs. This. A woman who finds the truest thing in you and offers to relieve you of the weight of being yourself, and you say yes, and you mean it, and you never even feel the door

close because the door feels like *rest.*

This is how she got all twenty of them.

The thought — cold, clear, operational, *Tatum's* kind of thought — was the thing that saved her, because it was the mission, and the mission was a hand reaching down into the water after her. She grabbed it. She thought of Tatum on the other side of that quiet door, holding a rope she couldn't pull, her face lowered, *dying* in there for her. She thought of a girl nine years ago who'd come down the hill in the rain with no shoes and not enough words left to say what she needed, who'd had this exact mercy done to her until there was nothing left to come down the hill. She thought, with a sudden savage gratitude, of how *furious* she was — and the fury was hers, was real, was *loud,* the loudest thing in her, and the Contesa had told her the loud thing was a mask but the fury was not a mask, the fury was the truest engine she had, and she let it roar up under the stillness and burn the pull to nothing.

She came back to herself behind her own eyes, where the monster couldn't see, in maybe a second and a half.

And then she did the hardest thing she had ever done, harder than any routine, any beam, any wreck: she took the real terror and the real pull still shaking through her body, and she *aimed* it. She let her eyes go wet and her breath go shallow and her face go soft and tempted and *frightened by how tempted she was* — which required no acting at all, which was the only reason it was survivable — and she whispered, in a small voice she did not have to fake:

"...How do you *know* that."

And the Contesa, who had heard that exact small broken question twenty times before, who lived for it, sat back with her eyes shining and the pleasure of a master who has found her material even finer than she'd hoped.

"Because I see you, fire," she said, gently. "I'm the only one who ever has. Everyone else has only ever seen the fire. I see the *tired.*" She picked up one of the steaming cups and pressed it into Linnéa's hands, warm, maternal, a benediction. "Drink. You don't have to decide anything today. Today you only have to sit, in the quiet, and feel how good it is to not be performing for anyone." She smiled. "I think you and I are going to do beautiful work together."

Linnéa held the cup in both hands so they'd have something to do that

wasn't shaking, and lowered her eyes, and let the loudest girl in the world sit perfectly, terribly still — and on the far side of the door, Tatum, who had stood holding a glass for eleven minutes with her eyes down and her whole body screaming, heard the Contesa's voice rise into that satisfied, lilting register, and could not know what it meant, and had to keep being furniture anyway, which was the hardest version of love there is.

It was Vanessa who got them out, on the terms she'd set, before the dark.

She appeared in the doorway of the quiet room a few minutes later — gracious, unhurried, the seller arriving to collect her stock — and said lightly, "There you are. I'm afraid I have to steal her back, darling; we've a dinner I can't move, and I never leave my goods anywhere before we've agreed a price." And the Contesa, flushed with success, certain she had all the time in the world and a willing project besides, did not argue. Why would she. The fire would keep. They'd talk after Halloween.

"After Halloween," the Contesa agreed, and walked them to the great door herself, and took Linnéa's face in both hands at the threshold one last time, fond, proprietary, and said, "Rest tonight, fire. You've earned it. You'll feel it more tomorrow — how tired you've been." And Linnéa, God help her, gave her the small grateful nod the words pulled out of her, because part of it was still true, and that was the part she'd be afraid of for a long time.

They went down the hill in the falling dark, the three of them, not speaking, the cheap red haunting blooming below, and they got well clear of the house — past the last lamp, past the covered stair, down where the citadel gave way to the lower town — before Linnéa stopped walking.

Tatum was already turning, already reaching, but Linnéa put up a hand — *not yet* — because she didn't trust what would come out of her if she was held just then, and she stood in the cold with her arms wrapped around her own sculpted shoulders, holding herself up, the way she always had, the way she'd just learned she was so tired of, and she breathed, and she got her face back.

"I know how she does it," Linnéa said, finally, to the dark, in a voice scraped clean of all its brightness. "I know exactly how she does it

now." She looked at Vanessa, and her eyes were wet and steady. "She doesn't break them. She finds the truest thing they've never said out loud — the thing they're most ashamed to want — and she offers it to them as *rest.* And it works. Vanessa, it *works,* I felt it work, on *me,* for a—" Her voice cracked once, and she mastered it. "There were twenty of them and not one of them was weak. They were all just *tired,* and somebody finally offered to let them stop, and how do you say no to that? How do you tell someone the door is a trap when the door looks like the only rest they've ever been offered?"

"You out-true her," Vanessa said quietly. The plan, arriving cold and clear. "She offers them rest. We offer them something the rest can't compete with."

"Which is what?"

"I don't know yet." Vanessa looked up the hill, at the one tasteful amber light burning over a houseful of women who'd wept with relief. "But now I know what we're bidding against. And I know she's never once had to bid against anyone, because no one's ever climbed that hill to take her stock back." Her jaw set. "One day. We have one day. Let's go home and figure out what's stronger than being allowed to stop."

And Tatum, finally, gently, took the hand Linnéa had been using to hold herself up, and held it instead — *let me be the wall a minute* — and Linnéa let her, and they walked the rest of the way down out of the dark together.

That's Chapter Thirteen — about 2,900 words, and built to be terrifying through *accuracy and intimacy* rather than violence. The horror is being *known* by a monster, and being tempted by your own most secret hunger.

The stillness callback is the engine, rendered entirely organically — never referencing how we know it. The Contesa, by pure predatory instinct, reaches straight down to the one buried thing in Linnéa: that the loudest woman alive is *so tired,* and her truest unspoken wish is to be allowed to **stop** — to be still, held in place, to let someone else be the wall. A reader who remembers what the dream-tech once saw in her will feel the floor drop; a new reader just experiences "the monster found the one secret she's never said aloud." And it's doubly cruel because stillness is also Linnéa's *weapon* — so the thing she

has to wield to survive (held stillness) is the exact wound being pressed.

The peak terror is the moment she **loses the line** — she came in to *perform* a small yielding, and the pull becomes so real that for one black moment she genuinely can't tell which "yes" is rising in her, the acted one or the true one. That's the machine seen from inside: *not bars, not drugs — a woman who finds the truest thing in you and offers to relieve you of the weight of being yourself, and the door feels like rest.* "This is how she got all twenty of them" is the operational thought (Tatum's kind of thought) that becomes the rope she grabs — along with Tatum at the door, the girl from nine years ago, and her own real **fury**, which the Contesa dismissed as a mask but which is actually the truest engine she has.

She survives by taking the real terror and *aiming* it — the performed flinch that requires no acting because it's real — and the Contesa, hearing her own favorite broken question ("how do you *know* that"), is delighted, certain she's found her finest project. No wire meant no rescue and no cutaway; Tatum holds a rope she can't pull for eleven minutes — "the hardest version of love there is."

And the chapter pays off into the wreck's design problem: Linnéa brings out the mechanism — *she offers them rest; how do you tell someone the door is a trap when it looks like the only rest they've ever been offered?* — and Vanessa names the counter they now have to invent against a one-day clock: *what's stronger than being allowed to stop?* The closing image inverts the wound into love — Tatum becomes the wall Linnéa was so tired of being for herself, and that's allowed, because it's chosen.

The thing Linnéa felt — that part of it was *true,* the part she'll be afraid of — is planted, not underlined. No narrator flash-forward; "difference" kept off; "partner" dynamic; her loudness scraped clean by the end as the cost.

Fourteen, when you want it: the crew against the one-day clock, designing "something stronger than rest" — and Aiko's twenty resurrections racing the same deadline.

Chapter 14

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Fifteen — The Other End of the Rope

They didn't sleep much, the night they came down off the hill, and by the next morning the fang-house had stopped being an operation and become a vigil.

Aiko hadn't moved from the monitors in fourteen hours. There was a wall of windows behind her going gray with the last dawn before Halloween, and four screens in front of her crawling with the slow architecture of twenty resurrections, and she looked, when Vanessa came down, like a woman holding her breath underwater.

"Talk to me," Vanessa said, setting coffee at her elbow.

"It's the worst thing I've ever built and the best." Aiko didn't look up. "In Cairo I took a man apart — erased him, account by account, until he was no one. It was clean. Deleting is *clean,* Vanessa, you just close doors. But making a person *exist* — making twenty people exist, well enough that they can stand at a border on the thirty-first and be real, fast enough that nobody upstream notices the records growing back—" She exhaled. "I can't do it from nothing. A real identity has *roots.* A birth, a baptism, a school, a clinic visit when she was nine, a dentist, a grandmother. I can forge the document, but a forged document with no roots is a flag, and a flag gets a frightened woman stopped at a border and sent *back.* And back is the only place that—"

"Knows their face," said Rodica, from the doorway. She had a shawl around her and her eyes were raw and she had clearly not slept either. "I know. I have been awake all night with the same problem from the other side."

She came and put a thick, battered folder on the table beside Aiko's keyboard. Photographs spilled half out — old ones, village ones, a christening, a school class, a girl on a bench.

"Roots," Rodica said. "You cannot make them from nothing. But I am not nothing. Forty years in this valley. The home two valleys over — I have given them money for the roof, I am on their charity rolls, I can walk in the front door tomorrow and no one blinks. They have *files,*

Aiko. The real children, before the foundation 'sponsored' them up the hill. Names. Birth dates. The mother who died, the village, the priest who did the baptism. The Contesa cut the girls *out* of those records — but a record that has been cut still has the *shape* of what was cut. The hole has edges." She tapped the folder. "I cannot give you twenty whole lives. But I can give you the edges of the holes. The shape of who each of them was before. You put your forgery back into the *shape that's already there,* and—"

"—and it has roots." Aiko had gone very still, looking at the old photographs, and then she looked up at Rodica with something close to awe. "You're not giving me identities. You're giving me the *outline* she erased around. I don't build from nothing. I build them back into their own holes." She turned to the screens with sudden ferocious energy, the underwater look gone. "Rodica, I need every name and date in that folder, and I need the home's file room, and I need you to get me in there today as a donor wanting a tour, and I will put twenty girls back into the world by tonight. *That's* the resurrection. Not new lives. Their *own* lives, grown back over the wound." She was already typing. "Go. Both of you. Stop watching me work, it's distracting and I love you and *go.*"

They went into the front room, where the rest of the family was, and where the real problem — the one Aiko's brilliance couldn't touch — was still sitting on the table where Linnéa had set it down the night before.

Because papers got a woman *across a border.* Papers did not get her to *walk out the door.*

"I've been chewing on it all night," Vanessa said, taking the good chair, "and I keep arriving at the same ugly wall. We can't out-bid her. That's the trap of it. She offers them rest — surrender — and surrender always, *always* feels better than struggle. There is no more comfortable thing we can offer than *stop fighting and let me hold you up.* If we walk in there on Halloween and say *come with us, be free, it'll be wonderful* — we're offering them a harder, scarier, more exhausting version of the exact thing she's offering them an easy version of. We lose that bid every time. Freedom is *work.* Rest is rest. People choose rest." She looked around at them. "So what beats rest? I genuinely don't know, and we have until tonight to know."

It was quiet. The clock — the real one, the one that said *Halloween tomorrow* — ticked in everyone's chest.

And then Linnéa spoke, and they all looked at her, because she'd been silent since the hill, the scraped-clean silence that wasn't like her at all.

"I can tell you what beats it," she said slowly. "Because I'm the only one of us it nearly got." She was sitting very upright, hands flat on her thighs, and the brightness wasn't back yet but something harder and steadier had taken its place. "She didn't threaten me. She found the truest thing in me — the thing I've never said out loud — and she offered to let me put it down. And it *worked,* for a second. I wanted it. I wanted it so much I lost track of whether I was acting." Her jaw tightened. "So I've thought about nothing else but what pulled me back. And it wasn't a better offer. Nothing was better than the rest. Three things broke it." She held up a finger. "One — the second I understood it wasn't rest. It was *erasure.* A grave that feels like a bed. The animal in me that wants to *stop* is loud, but there's an older animal underneath it that does *not* want to disappear, and the moment I saw the offer was disappearance, that older animal woke up *furious.*" Second finger. "Two — I knew Tatum was on the other side of the door. Someone who knew my real name. Holding a rope she couldn't even pull. Just — *there.* Knowing me. I wasn't choosing freedom in the abstract. I was choosing the person who was holding the other end of the rope." Third finger. "Three — I thought of the girl who came down to Rodica's nine years ago with no words left. A witness. Proof it had happened to someone real before me, and proof there was a *down the hill.*"

She put her hand down.

"That's what beats rest," Linnéa said. "Not a better rest. You can't win that. You beat it three ways at once: you show them the bed is a grave so the furious animal wakes up — you put a person on the other side of the door who knows their real name and is *holding the rope* — and you give them a witness, proof there's a down-the-hill and someone already waiting at the bottom of it." She looked at Vanessa. "She offers them oblivion and calls it peace. The one thing oblivion can't give you is *somebody who knows your name standing in the door.* That's the only thing stronger. Being *known,* by someone who came to *get* you."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then Vanessa let out a long breath, and there was something almost reverent in it.

"That's the wreck," she said softly. "That's the whole wreck. We don't seduce them out. We *wake* them, and then we hold the rope." She

was already building it, the cold clear architecture assembling behind her eyes. "Aiko gives them existence — the proof they're real, the roots, the down-the-hill made literal. Rodica is the witness who *remembers,* the face from before, walking in beside us so they know it's real. I do what she does, in reverse — I walk into each one and I don't offer comfort, I show her the grave, I wake the furious animal that won't be erased. And the rope—" She stopped, and looked at Linnéa, and her face changed.

"The rope is me," Linnéa said. Quietly. Steadily. "I have to go back in."

"Linnéa—" Tatum started.

"No, listen. *Listen.*" Linnéa turned to her partner, and the steadiness held. "Vanessa can show them the grave. Aiko can prove there's a door. But neither of them has stood in that warm quiet room and *felt the pull and lived.* I have. I'm the only person on this earth who can look those girls in the eye tonight and say *I know exactly what she offered you, because she offered it to me, and it's a lie, and I clawed out, and so can you, and I am holding the rope.* They won't believe a stranger who never felt it. They'll believe the one who did." Her voice cracked, just once, and held. "The thing that nearly unmade me is the only thing that can reach them. I don't get to leave that in the room. I have to go back and *use* it."

The room was silent. Tatum's eyes were wet and furious and proud all at once.

"Then I'm the rope on *your* end," Tatum said, fierce. "Same as before. I'm furniture, I'm one room away, and the second you give me a look, I burn it all down and we leave. That part's not negotiable and I'm not discussing it."

"That part's not negotiable," Linnéa agreed, and reached for her partner's hand, and this time she didn't hold herself up first.

Jordan, who had been at the window the whole time looking down at the lower town, spoke without turning around.

"Then here's the only piece left, and it's the one I can give you." He nodded at the glass. Below, in the gray morning, the town was already building its biggest night — scaffolding going up in the square, a stage, racks of fog machines, a banner reading HALLOWEEN AT THE CITADEL: 10,000 SOULS. "Tomorrow night this town fills with ten thousand strangers in masks, in fog, in the dark, all of them pretending to be something they're not. Every face hidden. Every

camera pointed at the stage. The whole town looking exactly one direction, on purpose, all night." He finally turned around. "We've spent two days hating the fog machines and the rubber bats and the cheap fake haunting. Tomorrow night the cheap fake haunting is the best cover any wrecker ever had. You want to move twenty erased women off a hill without a soul seeing? You do it inside ten thousand masked tourists who came specifically to not look at anything real." A grim flicker. "The town built us our exit. They've been building it for six hundred years. We just have to walk twenty women out through it wearing masks, into the one crowd on earth where nobody has a face."

Vanessa stood up. Outside, far down the hill, someone tested a fog machine, and a slow white cloud rolled along a medieval lane and dispersed into the cold, pointless and beautiful and, for the first time, *useful.*

"One day," she said. "Aiko resurrects them. Rodica remembers them. I wake them. Linnéa holds the rope. Tatum holds Linnéa. Jordan moves them out through the masks." She looked around at her strange, lethal, exhausted family. "Tomorrow the whole town pretends to be haunted. And while they're pretending—" the working smile, at last, "—we go up the hill and do the only real haunting in Transylvania. We walk into a house full of the disappeared, and we bring the dead back."

Chapter 15

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Sixteen — The Masque

Halloween came up out of the valley like a tide.

By full dark the lower town had stopped being a town and become a single organism of fog and torchlight and noise — ten thousand strangers poured in from three countries, every one of them in a mask, every one of them pretending to be something they weren't, the fog machines finally vindicated and roaring, the wolf-howl lost now under a real crowd's roar, the whole citadel below seething with faceless bodies all turned one way, toward the stage in the square where something loud was happening that none of them would remember and all of them had come to see. The town had spent six hundred years rehearsing for exactly this night, and tonight it performed its fake haunting at full volume, and not one of those ten thousand masked faces was looking up the hill.

Which was the entire point.

"Look at them," Vanessa murmured, climbing through the crowd in a long black domino mask and a coat the color of dried blood, Linnéa a half-step behind her in white and silver, Tatum behind that, freight again, carrying the bag. "Ten thousand people who came here specifically to not see anything real. Jordan was right. They built us a cathedral and filled it with people sworn to look the other way."

"Don't admire it," Tatum said quietly, from behind. "Use it."

They went up, against the current, away from the stage and the roar, up the covered stair where the crowd thinned and then was gone, up to the high quiet hill where Casa Corvina stood lit — and tonight, for the one night a year the Contesa opened her door, lit differently: not the tasteful amber alone, but braziers along the walk, and at the great iron door two of her girls in black gowns and silver half-masks receiving the guests of the only invitation in Transylvania that money mostly couldn't buy.

Because Casa Corvina did not do the town's Halloween. It did its own. An exclusive masque, by invitation, for the right people — the quiet billionaires, the ones who came and were never written about — a

single elegant evening of the *genuine article* held in deliberate, contemptuous counterpoint to the cheap roar down the hill. Real candles. Real dark. Real masks, the kind that cost what a car costs. And moving through all of it, silent, flawless, masked themselves in plain black silk that turned them into a row of identical lovely shadows: the girls.

The Contesa met them inside, unmasked — of course unmasked; the masque was for her guests to hide in, and she had never in her life wished to be anyone but exactly who she was — and her face lit when she saw Linnéa in the white and silver.

"You *brought* her," she breathed, the same words as before, the hunger the same. "On my night. You've decided."

"I've decided we'll talk," Vanessa said, light, a peer arriving at a peer's event. "It's your evening of the year, darling, I wasn't going to discuss business over breakfast like a peasant. Let me drink your wine and watch you work, and later — " she let it hang, conspiratorial, " — later you and I will sit down and I'll let you make me an offer for the fire."

"Later," the Contesa agreed, delighted, certain, and took Vanessa by the arm to parade her peer through the masque, and that was the first piece in place: the Contesa's eye, her whole sharp attention, fixed on the woman she most wanted to be seen by, walking the wrong direction, into the crowd, away from her girls.

And the moment the Contesa's back was turned, the operation began, quiet as a held breath, under the most dangerous roof in Romania.

Aiko was already inside, had been since the caterers arrived — a masked nobody in staff black, unremarkable, carrying a case no one questioned at an event with forty staff, her real work a small device now seated in the house's network closet that had, four minutes ago, put every camera in Casa Corvina into a gentle, looping lie. The house's eyes were showing its own security an empty, peaceful evening on a perfect loop. For the next two hours, inside these walls, nothing that happened would be recorded as having happened. Aiko had spent eighteen years' worth of one woman's cruelty learning how to make things not exist; tonight she'd turned it, for once, the right way round. *They won't see us. And after tonight, the world will finally see them.*

In the bag Tatum carried — the dull handler's bag no one looked at

twice — were twenty slim envelopes. Aiko had finished them at four o'clock that afternoon, grey-faced, after thirty hours, building twenty erased women back into the world along the outlines Rodica had pulled from the children's home: a birth grown back into its own scar, a baptism, a village, a mother's name. Not new lives. Their own. Each envelope held a passport and a name and the proof, in a frightened girl's own hand someday, that she had been born, and was real, and was missed.

And down at the bottom of the hill, where the covered stair spilled into the roaring masked crowd, two vehicles waited with their engines warm, and Jordan stood by them in a plain mask reading the flow of the crowd like a current chart, and beside him — refusing, absolutely, to wait anywhere safer — stood Rodica, in her good coat, her face bare, the one face in this whole night that some of these girls had seen before, the proof there was a bottom to the hill and someone waiting at it who *remembered.*

Everyone was in place.

Now someone had to throw the first rope.

Linnéa found Ana in the small service pantry off the great hall, alone for ten seconds, filling a tray — the door-girl, the one with noise left, the one whose hand had trembled when a stranger's eyes came up to meet hers two days ago.

Linnéa slipped in behind her and closed the door to a crack and took off her silver mask so the girl could see her whole face, because you do not throw a rope to someone from behind a mask.

"Ana." Soft. Quick. "Don't make a sound, and don't be afraid of me. I'm not one of her guests. I came here to get you out, tonight, and I have maybe ninety seconds, so I need you to be brave faster than is fair."

The girl had gone white and still, the tray rigid in her hands, the trained calm fighting with raw animal alarm. Her eyes flicked to the door — for the Contesa, for permission, for the reflex of a person who'd learned that being seen is danger.

"She offered you rest," Linnéa said, and watched the words land like a slap. "Didn't she. When you first came up the hill. She found the truest thing in you, the thing you'd never said out loud, the thing you were most tired of carrying — and she offered to let you put it down. To

stop. To be kept, so you'd never have to hold yourself up again." Linnéa's voice was steady and low and absolutely certain. "And it felt like mercy. It felt like the only rest anyone had ever offered you, and you said yes, and you've been saying yes every day since, because how do you say no to the only person who ever saw you?"

The tray was shaking now. Ana's mouth opened. Nothing came out.

"I know how it feels," Linnéa said, "because she did it to me. Two days ago. In the warm room with the fire. She found my truest thing and she offered me rest and for one second I wanted it so badly I forgot who I was." She leaned in. "It's not rest, Ana. It's a grave that feels like a bed. She's not keeping you. She's *erasing* you. There's no record you were ever born. She cut you out of the world so completely that if you vanished tonight there'd be no one to report missing, because officially there's no one here to miss." Her eyes held the girl's, fierce, refusing to let her look away. "That's not mercy. That's the most frightened animal in you screaming under all that quiet, and you've been told to call the screaming *peace.*"

A tear came down the girl's white face, over the cheekbone, and dropped.

"I can't," she whispered. The first words. "There's nowhere. There's no — I'm no one. I don't have papers, I don't have a name that's real, *Ana* isn't even — I can't go anywhere, there's no place that knows my—"

And Linnéa, who had been waiting for exactly this, who had been given the weapon that afternoon by a grey-faced Aiko and a sleepless Rodica, who understood that the one thing oblivion cannot give you is somebody who knows your name standing in the door — Linnéa reached out and took the trembling girl's face in both hands, gently, the way Tatum held her, and said the thing the crew had clawed back out of the holes in the records, the thing this girl had not heard spoken aloud by another human being in nine years:

"Daciana Munteanu."

The girl made a sound like something breaking.

"That's your name," Linnéa said, holding her up now, literally, because the girl's knees had gone. "Daciana Munteanu, born in Vâlcele, baptized in the church there, mother named Steluța who died when you were eleven. She didn't erase you well enough. We found you. You're *real,* Daciana, you were always real, there's a village and a

church and a grave with your mother in it and a piece of paper in my partner's bag right now with your name and your face on it that says you exist — and there's a woman at the bottom of this hill who remembers the night you came to her door once before, and she has waited nine years to open it for you." Her thumbs wiped the girl's tears. "I am holding the rope. I am not letting go. But you have to be the one who grabs it, right now, fast, because we have ninety seconds and nineteen more of you to reach, and I need the loud ones to bring the quiet ones, and Daciana — " a flash of the old Linnéa, fierce and bright and back from wherever it had gone, " — something tells me you used to be loud."

Daciana Munteanu — who had been Ana, who had been no one, who had been told for nine years that the screaming under her quiet was peace — looked at the wild masked woman holding her face and saying her mother's name, and somewhere far down under all the trained stillness, the furious animal that did not want to be erased woke all the way up.

"Yes," she said. Not a whisper now. "Yes. I — *yes.*" Her hands came up and gripped Linnéa's wrists, hard. "There are nineteen. Some won't believe you. But there are four of us who still — who still have it, the screaming, we hide it from each other but I *know* which ones — " The words were tumbling now, nine years of them. "Imelda. Roza. The little one she calls Sofia. They still have it. If they see me go, if they hear my real—" She stopped, gulping air. "Tell me what to do. Tell me and I'll do it. I'll be loud. I remember how."

And in the great hall beyond the door, the Contesa laughed at something Vanessa had said, the warm certain laugh of a woman at the center of her own beautiful evening, sure she had all the time in the world, parading her peer past a row of identical silent shadows in black silk masks — not one of whom, she was absolutely certain, would ever be anyone again.

She was wrong about one of them already.

She had nineteen left to be wrong about, and ninety seconds had become eighty, and Linnéa Bergström put her mask back on, and smiled behind it the old bright dangerous smile, and threw open the pantry door.

Chapter 16

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Seventeen — The First of Her Girls

Daciana Munteanu went back out into the masque loud.

Not loud with noise — loud the way Linnéa had meant it, loud in the body, lit from inside, moving through the row of identical silent shadows with a current running off her that the other girls felt before they understood. She found Imelda first, at the foot of the stair with a tray of glasses, and she did not explain, because there was no time to explain; she simply took the girl's face in her hands the way Linnéa had taken hers, and she said a name — not *Imelda,* the keeper's name, but the other one, the buried one, the one Aiko had grown back out of a hole in a registry that afternoon — and Linnéa, two steps behind with the silver mask back on, watched the exact thing happen again that had happened in the pantry: the white stillness, the tray going rigid, and then, underneath, the furious animal coming up out of the deep water all at once.

It worked because they recognized it in each other. That was the thing none of them had planned and all of them should have: a stranger saying your real name is a miracle, but a *sister* saying it — one of the silent shadows you'd stood beside for years, suddenly lit, suddenly using her real mouth to say your real name — that wasn't a miracle, that was *permission.* If Daciana could be real, you could be real. The noisy ones woke the noisy ones, and the four of them — Daciana, Imelda, and the two Daciana had named in the pantry, Roza and the small fierce one the Contesa called Sofia — became, in the space of four minutes, a quiet contagion of waking moving through the lovely shadows of the masque.

Tatum worked the bag.

She drifted through it all as furniture, the dull handler no one watched, and as each girl woke she pressed an envelope into her hands — flat, slim, real — and murmured the only briefing there was time for: *your name is inside, and a passport with your face, you are real, put on a guest's mask from the cloakroom and walk down the hill like you're leaving a party, there is a woman at the bottom who remembers you.* Twenty envelopes. She'd counted them four times that afternoon. She handed out the first, the third, the sixth, her face

down, her hands steady, her whole body screaming with the joy and terror of it, furniture doing the most alive thing furniture has ever done.

And they began to leave.

In twos and threes, masked now in the guests' own cast-off dominoes from the cloakroom, indistinguishable from the quiet billionaires drifting out early — down the great stair, out the iron door past the braziers, down the covered stair where the roar of the town came up to meet them, and into it, into the ten thousand masked strangers who had come to this town specifically to not see anything real, and who did not see, now, the realest thing in Transylvania walking down among them: erased women, putting their faces back on, going home.

At the bottom of the hill, where the covered stair spilled into the fog and the torchlight and the noise, Rodica stood bare-faced in her good coat and watched the first of them come down.

She didn't know which one it would be. She'd told herself not to hope it would be a face she knew. And then a girl came down out of the dark in a borrowed mask, clutching a slim envelope to her chest like it was her own heart in her hands, and at the bottom she stopped, and looked at Rodica's bare ordinary frightened hopeful face — the one face in ten thousand that wasn't hidden — and something passed over the girl that Rodica had waited nine years to be on the receiving end of. The girl pulled off the borrowed mask. And Rodica did know her — not from the hill, from *before,* from a village fair a dozen years ago, a child on her father's shoulders — and Rodica opened her arms, and said, in their own language, *"I remember you. I remember your face. Come, come, you're safe, I've got you, I remember,"* and the girl walked into the arms of the one person at the bottom of the hill who had never stopped knowing she was real, and Jordan, beside them, his face a mask reading the crowd-current like a tide, quietly opened the door of the first warm car.

It was working. For nine minutes, in a house with its eyes blinded and its mistress occupied and its silent shadows waking one by one, it was *working.*

And then the first of her girls saw.

She had no name anyone living remembered, not even herself. The Contesa called her Lia, and Lia had been on the hill longer than any of

them — the first, the prototype, the most finished, the one the others were measured against and the one the Contesa trusted to keep the rest quiet, because Lia had been quiet so long that the quiet had become the whole of her. She did not police the others out of cruelty. She had nothing left to be cruel with. She policed them because her keeper's approval was the only warmth in the world, and protecting it was the only self she had, and she had learned, more thoroughly than any of them, to call the screaming peace.

She came out of the kitchen passage with a fresh tray and she saw a thing that did not fit: two of the shadows by the cloakroom, *masked* — guests' masks, on the girls, which was wrong, which was *not allowed* — and one of them was Roza and Roza was *crying* and *smiling at the same time,* which was a thing finished girls did not do, and Roza was holding a flat white envelope to her chest, and Lia's whole trained body went cold with the specific terror of a person who has seen a rule broken and knows, in her bones, that broken rules are paid for by everyone.

She set down the tray.

And Daciana — lit, loud, moving — saw her see it, and crossed the floor fast, and caught Lia's arm before she could turn for the hall.

"Lia. *Lia,* look at me—"

"You have to stop." Lia's voice was a thin frightened thread. "Whatever this is, you have to stop, she'll — if she finds — we'll all—" Her eyes were going to the great hall, toward the warm certain sound of the Contesa's laughter, toward the only safety she had ever been given, the terrible safety of being kept. "I have to tell her. I have to tell her before it's worse. She'll be *gentle* if we tell her ourselves, she's always gentle when we—"

"Lia, listen to me, your name—" Daciana's hands were on her face now, desperate, doing the thing that had worked on all of them, reaching for the buried self with the recovered name, the name Aiko had clawed out of a hole that afternoon. "Your name is *Mărioara.* Mărioara Crețu, you were born in—"

And the most finished of all the Contesa's girls flinched away from her own real name as if it had burned her.

Because that was the deepest cruelty of the cage, the one even the crew hadn't fully understood until this second: the further gone you are, the more your own true self feels like the danger. Daciana's real

name had been a rope because Daciana still had an animal under the quiet to grab it. Lia's animal had been quiet so long it no longer recognized its own name as rescue. To Lia, *Mărioara* wasn't a rope. It was a stranger's hand reaching into the one safe dark place she had left, and every instinct nine years in the building screamed that the only way to be safe was to run to her keeper and *tell.*

"That's not my name," Lia whispered, backing away, her face a mask of pure terror, and then, louder, breaking, turning: "*That's not my name—*"

And she ran for the great hall.

Daciana lunged and missed. Linnéa was already moving, mask gone, three strides across the floor — but a wild masked woman sprinting through a masque is the one thing in this house guaranteed to be seen, and Linnéa knew it even as she ran, knew that catching Lia loudly was as bad as not catching her, and the cold math of it was happening behind her eyes: *if I tackle the girl I blow it, if I don't she reaches the Contesa, either way it's loud now, either way the quiet part is over—*

In the great hall, mid-laugh, mid-sentence, her arm still linked through Vanessa's, the Contesa turned at the sound of one of her shadows crying out in a voice no finished girl should have — turned toward the cloakroom, toward the broken figure of the first of her girls stumbling toward her with a wrongness all over her face — and her sharp, careful, eighteen-years-uncaught instinct came awake all at once like a struck bell.

And Vanessa, who had felt the woman's whole body change in the half-second before her face did, who had nine minutes' worth of women already walking down the hill behind her and could not let this turn around now, made the only move left on the board.

She tightened her arm through the Contesa's, hard, holding her in place for one extra heartbeat, leaned in close to the ear of the loneliest, hungriest, most certain woman in Transylvania, and said — warm, intimate, devastating, the witch finally letting the other witch see exactly which kind she was —

"Don't turn around yet, darling. You'll miss the best part."

The Contesa went very still.

"What did you do," she breathed. Not a question. The certainty draining out of her face, replaced by something that, on her, almost

no one had ever seen: the beginning of fear.

"The same thing you do," Vanessa said, and let go of her arm, and let her turn, and let her *see* — the cloakroom, the broken girl, the missing shadows, the open iron door, the masks gone from the cloakroom hooks, the whole beautiful blinded house quietly emptying of the disappeared. "I found the truest thing in this house. And I offered it something better than rest."

Chapter 17

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Eighteen — Options

They came down the hill in masks.

That was the thing no one watching would ever have been able to testify to afterward, even if anyone had been watching, which no one was: that somewhere in the river of ten thousand masked strangers pouring through Sighișoara on Halloween night, a current of perhaps twenty women moved the other way — down out of the citadel, through the fog and the torchlight and the roar, past the stage where the town performed its loud fake haunting at the dead of the year — and not one of those twenty faces could be seen, because every one of them was hidden behind a borrowed domino, indistinguishable from the revelers, indistinguishable from each other, faceless in the one crowd on earth where facelessness was the rule.

At the bottom, where the covered stair spilled out, the cars were waiting with their engines warm, and the women came to them in twos and threes out of the crowd, and were folded inside, and the doors closed soft, and that was all. No alarm. No pursuit reached this far yet. Just the ordinary churn of a festival night and a few quiet cars pulling away from the edge of it, the most unremarkable thing in a town built that night for not remarking on anything.

Jordan stood by the last car as the last of them came down.

He didn't say much — he never did — but he counted each woman in with his eyes, and to each driver he gave the same low word, and the drivers were people he'd arranged, paid, briefed, the kind of quiet professionals who did exactly what they were told and forgot it by morning, and the route was a route he'd built three ways in case one closed, and when the last door shut he put his hand flat on the roof of the car for one second, the way a man does when he's checked a structure and found it sound, and then he stepped back and let it go.

He wasn't going with them. That was deliberate, too. The women had had quite enough of being possessed by someone who decided where they went; the last thing Jordan Harlan was going to do was deliver them to safety personally, like luggage he'd grown fond of. He'd built the road. They'd travel it without him. His care was in the structure,

where it had always lived, and the structure would hold whether he was in the car or not.

The cars pulled out into the night, and turned west, and the citadel and its one tasteful amber light fell away behind them.

Daciana Munteanu sat in the back of the second car with her face against the cold glass and watched her country go by in the dark.

She had not been outside the walls of Casa Corvina in nine years. She had not been outside the town in longer. And now there was *road* — kilometer after kilometer of it, the white milestones ticking past in the headlights, each one a number that meant she was further from the hill than she had been a moment ago, and then further still, and then further than she had ever been allowed to be. She counted them for a while. Then she stopped counting, because the counting was the old habit, the kept habit, the measuring of the size of her cage, and there was no cage anymore, there was only the dark and the milestones and the *going.*

Beside her, Roza had fallen asleep against her shoulder almost at once, the deep bottomless sleep of a body that had not felt safe enough to truly sleep in years, and Daciana held still so as not to wake her — held still the new way, the chosen way, not the way she'd been taught. Across from them, the small fierce one the Contesa had called Sofia sat alone, upright, not touching anyone, her envelope clutched to her chest in both hands, staring out the window with dry wide eyes, and Daciana understood that too and left her alone, because some of them needed to be held and some of them needed, after nine years of hands deciding everything for them, to sit by themselves and have no one touch them at all, and freedom meant both were allowed.

The dawn came up grey and enormous over a wide foreign plain.

There was a border.

Daciana had been afraid of the border in a way she had not been able to name — the deep terror of the erased, that at the line where they check who you are, the world will look at you and find no one there. The car slowed. A booth, a bored official in the cold morning light, a hand out for documents. The driver passed back the slim envelopes. And Daciana watched the official open hers, and look at the passport, and look at her face — at *her face,* her real face, bare now, the mask in her lap — and look back at the passport, and find that the two

matched, and that she was a person, a citizen, someone with a name and a date and a place she'd been born, someone who *existed* — and hand it back, and wave them through, bored, indifferent, miraculous.

The woman beside the driver made a small sound. Sofia, in the corner, was crying without any expression on her face at all. Daciana held her own passport in both hands and looked at her own name in it and understood that she had just done the most ordinary thing in the world — crossed a border — and that it was the most extraordinary thing that had ever happened to her, because she had done it as *someone,* and the country that had unmade her was behind them now, falling away mile by mile, and could not reach across the line to take her name back.

She put her hand out, then, to Sofia in the corner — not to hold her, just an open hand on the seat between them, an offer, *if you want it* — and after a long moment Sofia, who had not let anyone touch her since the hill, put her small hand into it.

The bed and breakfast had six rooms and stood at the end of a lane in a quiet country none of them had ever seen, with a garden going to seed in the late autumn and woodsmoke coming from the chimney and a woman in the doorway who had been waiting for them.

She was nobody's idea of a rescuer — middle-aged, floury-handed, warm — and she did not make a speech or weep over them or treat them like the wounded. She had been told, by the quiet man who'd arranged everything and whom she'd never met in person, exactly what these women would and would not be able to bear, and so she simply opened the door and said, in careful English and then in careful Romanian, "You'll be hungry. There's food. The rooms are yours for as long as you need them, and no one is going to ask you for anything," and stood back to let them in, and that was, somehow, exactly right.

Six rooms for twenty women, which meant they would have to choose how to fill them — and that was the first thing, Daciana realized, watching them drift through the warm low house: nobody told them where to sleep. Some of them found each other at once and claimed a room in fours and fives, dragging the mattresses together on the floor the way they must have learned to on the hill, unwilling even now to be apart in the dark. Some of them walked the house alone, opening

doors, standing in empty rooms, learning what it felt like to be somewhere no one would come in.

And in each room, on each bed, the quiet man had left things.

A wallet for every one of them — real leather, and inside, cash, more cash than most of them had seen in their lives, enough, the floury woman explained when they asked, to live on carefully for a few years; cards in their own new-old names; the boring miraculous documents of a person who is going to go on existing. And beside each wallet, a binder.

Daciana opened hers at the little table by the window.

It was full of *options.* That was the only word for it. Pages and pages, in plain language, in Romanian and English both: cities a person might go to, with notes on each. Schools that would take an adult who'd missed years, and how the fees were already handled. Trades a person could learn. Apartments, with photographs. A page that simply said, at the top, *Things people do for work,* as though no one had ever told her before that this was a category of thing that existed and that she might choose among them. A page about how to see a doctor. A page about how to open a door that locks from the inside, and that the lock would be hers. Nowhere in the entire binder did it say what she *should* do. Every page only laid out, patiently, what she *could.*

She turned the pages for a long time.

She had been offered, once, on a hill, the end of all choosing — the rest of never having to decide anything again, the mercy of being kept. And she understood now, with the binder open under her hands, exactly what had been done to her, because here was the opposite of it, and the opposite of being kept was not freedom in the abstract. The opposite of being kept was a *binder full of choices and a lock on the inside of the door.* It was almost unbearable. It was the most generous thing anyone had ever done to her. Both at once.

She turned to a fresh page near the back, blank, headed only *If you don't know yet,* and under it: *That's allowed. There's no hurry. You have years.*

She put her head down on the binder and wept, finally, the way she had not let herself weep in front of the others, and no one came in, because the door locked from the inside, and that was the whole point.

By mid-morning the house had filled with an unfamiliar sound, and it took the floury woman a moment, drying her hands at the kitchen window, to understand what it was.

It was the masks.

They'd kept them — most of them still had the borrowed dominoes, the silver and black and gilt the guests of Casa Corvina had cast off, the disguises that had carried them down through ten thousand strangers — and now, in the safe low rooms with the autumn light coming in, the women had begun to *play* with them. Sofia, who had not been touched in nine years, was holding one up to her face and lowering it, holding it up and lowering it, peeking over the top of it at Roza across the room, and Roza was doing it back, the two of them ducking behind the masks and popping up, and somewhere in it a sound was happening that none of them had made in longer than they could remember, a high helpless ridiculous sound, and it took the floury woman a moment to place that, too.

They were laughing.

Two of them had swapped masks and were parading, exaggerating, being someone else on purpose, for *fun,* because being someone else had been the whole architecture of their survival and now it was a toy. One girl wore hers pushed up on top of her head and forgot it was there. Sofia put hers on and crept up behind Daciana and said *boo* — actually said it, the silliest word in the world — and Daciana turned around with her own face bare and her eyes still red and laughed, helplessly, at a small fierce girl in a Halloween mask who three days ago had not been allowed to have a name.

They played like children, because no one had let them be children, and because the masks were theirs now to put on and take off exactly as they pleased, a face to wear or not wear for no reason but delight, and because the lock was on the inside of the door, and because there were years.

They were not all there.

Daciana had counted, in the night, the old kept habit dying hard, and the count was short. The four she'd named in the pantry had come — Imelda, Roza, the small fierce Sofia — and most of the silent shadows

had grabbed the rope when it was thrown, real names waking real animals all down the line. But not all. A few had been too frightened, too far, too finished, and had not come down the hill, and one of them Daciana could not stop thinking about: the first of the Contesa's girls, the longest-kept, the one who had flinched from her own true name as if it were the danger and run the other way.

Daciana stood at the window of the six-room house with her binder of options under her hand and her mask on top of her head and the laughing going on behind her, and she looked east, the way they'd come, toward a country and a hill she would never go back to, and she let herself grieve, for a moment, the one who hadn't been able to grab the rope — the one for whom her own name had become the cage.

Then Sofia said *boo* again behind her, and Daciana turned around, and chose, the way she was going to get to choose everything now, to be in the room where the living were.

Chapter 18

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Nineteen — These Tenants

The morning after Halloween, the town slept it off, and the hill went dark.

That was the first thing Rodica noticed when she came down before dawn, before any of her guests were stirring, and stood at the front-room window with her coffee going cold in her hand: the one tasteful amber light that had burned over the citadel every night for eighteen years — the light she had looked at every night for eighteen years, the way you look at a thing you have decided you can do nothing about — was *out.* Casa Corvina sat up there on the high side of the hill in the grey first light, dark and shut and emptied, and Rodica stood at her window in her dressing gown and looked at the dark house for a long time, not yet daring to understand it.

The lower town lay sprawled and snoring under its hangover, fog machines silent, the stage half-struck, ten thousand strangers gone back wherever masked strangers go, plastic fangs trodden into the cobbles. Her town. Her hungover, ridiculous, beloved town. And above it, the dark house.

She was still standing there when the strange family came down to her, one by one, in the grey light.

They looked, she thought, like people who had not slept and did not mind — tired in the clean way, the way you are tired after the hay is in before the rain. Vanessa came first, and then the big quiet man, and the gymnast and her soft one, and last the small dark clever one who never seemed to look at anything and saw everything. They gathered in her front room among the skull lights and the cape rack and the basket of sanitized teeth, and nobody said anything for a moment, and Rodica set down her cold coffee.

"It is dark," she said. She didn't look away from the window. "The house. Eighteen years it is never dark, and this morning it is dark." She turned. "Tell me. I have earned it. Tell me all of it, every piece, slowly, and do not leave the bad parts out, because I have imagined worse bad parts than you could invent and I would rather know the true ones."

So they told her.

They told her the girls were real now — that was the word Vanessa used, *real,* and Rodica understood it the way she understood things that were too big to feel all at once, in pieces, around the edges. Real, with names — their own names, the ones from before, dug back out of the holes where they'd been cut away. Real, with papers, with faces that matched the papers, with a border already behind them by now, crossed in the grey hours while the town slept. Real, with a warm house at the end of a lane in a quiet country, and a woman who'd been waiting in the doorway, and rooms that locked from the inside, and money enough to live on carefully for years, and — Vanessa said this last part watching Rodica's face — *options.* Pages and pages of options. The opposite, she said, of being kept.

Rodica's hand had come up to her mouth somewhere in the middle of this and stayed there.

"Not all," she said, through her fingers, because she had imagined worse bad parts and she needed to know. "You did not get all of them. Tell me that part too."

"No," said Tatum, gently. "Not all. A few were too far. The ones who'd been there longest, who couldn't believe it fast enough, who heard their own names and ran the other way because their own names had become the frightening thing." She didn't dress it up. "We couldn't take them out by force — you can't carry a grown woman down a hill full of strangers screaming, and you can't free someone who fights you to stay. So we let them go. We made the choice to save the nineteen we could rather than lose all twenty trying to drag the ones who wouldn't come." She held Rodica's eyes. "I won't pretend that doesn't cost. It costs. But the house is open now, and the woman who locked them is finished, and if any of them ever finds the courage to walk down the hill on their own—" she glanced toward the window, "—there's a landlady at the bottom who knows how to leave soup at a kitchen door."

Rodica's eyes went bright and full, and she pressed her lips together and nodded once, hard, and did not let it spill, because there was still more to hear and she would not waste the hearing on her own crying.

"And *her,*" she said. The word came out of eighteen years. "The one on the hill. The Contesa." She said the title like spitting a seed. "Tell me what you did to her. Tell me she is dead."

"She's not dead," Vanessa said.

Rodica's face fell, and Vanessa held up a hand.

"Listen to the whole of it before you decide that's a disappointment," she said. "We don't kill people. We do something I think you'll find you like better." She nodded at the small dark clever one. "Tell her, Aiko."

And Aiko, who had not slept in two days and had the flat bright calm of a woman who had finished a long and satisfying piece of work, told Rodica what she had done.

"She built her whole self out of paper," Aiko said. "No real title, no real lineage, no real name — she invented a woman called the Contesa eighteen years ago and built her out of documents, money nobody could source, a charitable foundation, awards, a reputation as a saint. All paper. All forgery, just very good forgery." She turned her cup on the table. "And the way she held the girls was to do the opposite for them — to take what little paper said they existed and cut it away until there was nothing. She built herself up out of paper and she erased them down to nothing, using the exact same skill, pointed two directions." A small, cold, satisfied pause. "So last night, while she was busy being charmed by Vanessa, I pointed it back at her. Everything that said she was the Contesa — the foundation, the accounts, the title, the unsourced fortune, the woman herself — I cut it away. All of it. The same way she cut away the girls. By this morning there is no Contesa. There's no foundation. There's no money. There's a woman of no name and no nation and no fortune, sitting alone in a house she no longer legally owns, in a town that no longer needs her, who cannot prove to a single soul that any of it was ever hers, because the proof is gone, because *she taught me how.*"

The room was quiet.

"She erased twenty women so completely there was no one to report them missing," Aiko said. "Now there's no one to report *her.* She offered them oblivion and called it peace. I gave her the real kind." She finished her coffee. "And the money — her fortune, the unsourced money — didn't vanish. It went somewhere first. It paid for the warm house at the end of the lane, and the wallets, and the years. The woman who unmade those girls funded every one of their new lives, down to the last leu, and she will never know it, and she could never prove it, and there is nothing she can do about any of it ever again." Aiko set the cup down. "She spent eighteen years taking without

consent. She just gave a great deal away the same way. That's the part I'm proudest of."

Rodica stared at her.

Then she made a sound — not a laugh, not a sob, something older than both — and she sat down heavily in the chair she'd sat in the night she brought out the real vișinată, and she put both her broad hands flat on the table and looked at them, and she said, in a voice gone strange:

"You took her money and you bought those girls a life with it." She looked up. "You made the witch pay for her own undoing." She shook her head slowly. "I have lived sixty-one years and I did not know it was *allowed* to do that. I did not know there were people who *did* that."

She looked around at the five of them — the tired, unsleeping, ordinary-looking strangers standing in her ridiculous front room among the plastic fangs — and something crossed her face that Vanessa had been watching for, the same wonder she'd shown the first night when Vanessa had named the beautiful interior and the bat outside as the work of one woman, except a thousand times larger now.

"*Who are you people,*" Rodica said. It wasn't really a question. "You come on a train, you wear the teeth, you eat my cherries, you make jokes — and you are — what *are* you—"

And Jordan, who had been standing quietly by the door the whole time, who had said almost nothing, crossed to the long table and set down two things.

The first was a binder.

It was the same binder the girls had — Rodica could see it was the same, the plain serious cover, the careful pages — and Jordan opened it to show her: not cities and schools, those weren't her needs, but the things that were. The mortgage on Castel Drakula, paid. In full. Gone. A page of money, hers, enough that the word *mortgage* would never again decide a single thing she did. Options, if she ever wanted them — a way to leave, a way to stay, a way to fix the radiator that had never worked, a way to be, for the rest of her life, a woman who did things because she chose to and not because the money came when the money came.

"You looked up that hill for eighteen years," Jordan said, "when it cost you to look and cost you more to think about doing anything. You gave us the shape of the holes. You gave Linnéa your grandmother's cherries. You sat down in the coven chair when the clean thing was to notice nothing, and you said the clean you had left was dirty, and then you got in the car at the bottom of the hill with your bare face hanging out for any of her people to see, and you caught those girls one by one and told them you remembered." He closed the binder and pushed it toward her. "You're not the landlady. You stopped being the landlady the second you sat down. You were the sixth one of us. So you get what the rest of us get."

The second thing Jordan set down was a roll of banknotes the size of his fist.

Rodica looked at it.

"That's the tip," Jordan said, deadpan, dry as a stone. "For the room. The breakfast was excellent and the ţuică nearly killed me and the bat over your door is the worst thing I have ever seen in my life." He stepped back toward the door. "Buy some real bats."

And that did it. That, of all of it — not the freed girls, not the unmade witch, not the paid mortgage, but the stupid wonderful joke about the bats — that was the thing that finally broke the surface, and Rodica's face crumpled, and she opened her mouth to cry, the great release of eighteen years finally arriving—

—and it didn't come.

Because it was too much. Because what they had done was larger than her crying could hold, larger than grief or relief or gratitude, larger than the machinery a person uses to feel ordinary enormous things. She sat there with her hands flat on the table and her face working and no tears came, because tears were for sorrow and for joy and this was neither, this was something she had not felt in so long she had genuinely forgotten the shape of it, the specific impossible feeling of a person who has been *blessed* — visited, undeservedly, by grace she did not earn and could not have asked for because she had not believed it existed to ask. She had forgotten how. She had spent eighteen years forgetting how, looking up a dark hill, and now the feeling was back, too big to fit through the small door of weeping, and so she did not weep. She just sat there, blessed, and let it fill her up past the brim.

"Visiting angels," she said, finally, in a wondering whisper, to no one, to all of them. "That is what you are. I have been calling you in my head all morning and I did not have the word until now. You are not — you are not *people,* not only people, people do not do this." She looked up, and her eyes were dry and shining and full of the thing she'd forgotten. "You are visiting angels. You came down off a train into my silly town wearing the teeth, and you went up the hill, and you brought the dead back, and now you will leave and I will never see you again and no one will ever believe me, and it does not matter that no one will believe me, because *I* will know, for the rest of my life I will *know,* that once the angels came to Sighișoara and stayed in the fang-house and drank my grandmother's cherries." She pressed her hand to her chest. "I had forgotten you could feel like this. Thank you for that most of all. Not the money. *That.* I had forgotten."

Nobody corrected her. Nobody told her they were the furthest thing from angels, that they were predators who had simply, this once, pointed themselves at a worse predator. There are times when the kindest thing you can do with a person's understanding of you is to leave it exactly as they need it to be, and Vanessa — who lied for a living, who had lied her way up that hill and into that woman's confidence and back out again — found she could not bring herself to correct this one true thing Rodica had decided to believe. Let her have her angels. She'd earned the believing.

They left her in the doorway an hour later, with the binder and the absurd roll of banknotes and the dark empty hill behind her and the hungover town waking below, and as the cars pulled away Vanessa looked back once and saw Rodica standing under the cheap plastic bat with her hand raised, not waving exactly, just held up, the way you hold a hand up to something departing that you want to keep in the air a moment longer.

And then the citadel fell away behind them, and the Carpathians rose up green and ancient on every side, and they turned west, toward the train, toward home.

Chapter 19

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Twenty — The Still Point

The same train carried them west that had carried them east, and it was the same and it was not.

The mahogany was the same, and the brass, and the marquetry cranes in the dining car that Vanessa was still fairly sure were not anatomically possible. But the family that had boarded going east had been bored and bright and hungry for nonsense, and the family going west was tired in the clean way, the hay-in-before-the-rain way, quieter, and changed in the particular manner of people who had set out to do one thing and done another, much larger one instead. Outside the windows the Carpathians unspooled in reverse — the fortified churches, the haystacks, the storks' nests gone empty now with the season — falling away behind them mile by mile, the green ancient country that had hidden a monster on a hill and would close over the place where the monster had been like water over a stone.

Vanessa sat in the dining car with a glass of something Burgundian and watched it go.

"I came here to *not* do this," she said, to Jordan, who sat across from her the way he had on the way out, doing the thing he did where he let a view talk and didn't talk over it. "Do you remember? I lay upside down on the sofa and I said I was tired of taking things apart and I wanted a holiday with no autopsy at the end of it. Ten empty days. Pleasure with no consequences to clean up." She turned her glass. "And I lasted three days before I was standing in a stranger's doorway smelling a wreck, and I dragged my entire family into the most dangerous thing we've ever done on what was supposed to be my vacation, and I am sitting here now having had — " she stopped, and something moved across her face that was almost rueful, almost wondering, " — the best Halloween of my entire life. I'm a little appalled at myself, honestly."

"You didn't fail at the holiday," Jordan said.

"I absolutely failed at the holiday. There was an autopsy. There's always an autopsy. I am constitutionally incapable of leaving a thing alone."

"You didn't take something apart this time." He said it simply, the structural truth of it, the thing he'd seen before she had. "Every other wreck, we find the lie and we widen it until something comes down. This time you walked into a house and you put twenty people *back together.* You didn't do an autopsy. You did the opposite of an autopsy." He looked at her with the warmth he saved for the handful of times a year it mattered most. "You can't help being what you are. You stopped pretending that was a thing to apologize for years ago. The only new information from this trip is that what you are can build as well as break, if you point it the right direction." A pause. "That's not a failed holiday, Vanessa. That's the best possible version of you having one."

She looked at him for a long moment, and didn't argue, which was its own kind of agreement, and turned back to the window where her country of monsters rolled away into the dusk.

Linnéa had been quiet the whole way, and Tatum, who had been watching her the way she always watched her, finally took her by the hand somewhere after dark and led her back through the swaying corridor to their compartment and slid the door shut and said, "Tell me. You've been carrying it since the hill. I've been waiting for you to put it down. Put it down now."

Linnéa sat on the folded-out bed and looked at her hands.

"There's a part I didn't tell anyone," she said. "Not Vanessa, not in the plan, not even — not even when I gave them the thing about what beats the rest. I gave them the *true* thing about how it works, I just didn't give them the part that was true about *me.*" She swallowed. "When she had me in that room. When she found it — the wanting to stop, the wanting to be held still and put it all down — I told everyone I felt the pull for a second and clawed back. And that's true. But it wasn't a *second,* Tatum. And it wasn't that the pull was *almost* real." She looked up, and her eyes were bright and frightened. "It was real. All of it. She found the truest thing in me, the thing I am most ashamed to want, and for a — for longer than a second — I couldn't tell her *yes* from the yes I'd say to you. I lost the line completely. I sat in that chair and I genuinely could not tell whether the thing rising up in me wanting to stop was the trap she was setting or — or just me, wanting to come home to you and be held and stop being the loudest thing in the room for once in my life. I couldn't tell the difference. And that's the part that's been eating me." Her voice cracked. "Because

if I can't tell *her* offer from *yours* — if a monster can find my most private true thing and counterfeit it well enough that I can't tell it from the real one — then what does that make the real one? What if the thing I have with you, the thing where I get to stop and be still and you hold me — what if that's just a *hunger,* just a soft place, just a vulnerability that anyone clever enough could find and use? She used it. She nearly had me with it. What if you're just—" She stopped, unable to finish, because the next words were unbearable.

Tatum was quiet for a moment. Then she sat down beside her on the bed, their shoulders touching, the specific quality of proximity that said *I am here and I am not going anywhere,* and she did not rush.

"I've always known it was there," she said finally. "The wanting to stop. I knew it before you told me, before you knew how to say it. I've been the place you come back to and stop for as long as we've been us — you just never had to name it out loud before, because I never needed you to." She took Linnéa's hand. "So let me tell you the thing you can't see from inside it, because you're too close. You're right that she found the true thing. You're right that the hunger is the same hunger. She didn't make it up — she's good, she found the real door." Her thumb moved over Linnéa's knuckles. "But what she offered you through that door and what I offer you through that door are not the same thing, and the fact that you couldn't tell in the moment doesn't mean there's no telling them apart. It means she's a very good forger. A forged painting and the real one can look identical to the eye. That doesn't make the real one a forgery. It makes the forger dangerous."

She turned, and made Linnéa look at her.

"She offered you stillness so she could *erase* you. Stop, and stop being anyone, forever, kept, owned, gone — rest as a grave. That's what was on the other side of her door." Tatum's voice was very steady. "What's on the other side of mine is the exact opposite, and it's the opposite in the one way that matters: when you stop with me, you stay *you.* You put it down for an hour, a night, a week, and the aliveness doesn't go anywhere — it waits, and it's all still there when you pick it back up, because I am holding you *still,* not holding you *down.* She wanted you to stop existing. I want you to stop *performing,* so the realest version of you can rest in the open where I can see it." She pressed Linnéa's hand to her own chest. "The hunger is real and it's yours and it is the most precious thing you've ever shown me, and a monster counterfeiting it doesn't poison it any more than a forged signature ruins your real name. Your real name is still yours, Daciana's real name was still hers, and your true soft place is

still *ours,* and the proof is this: you clawed out of that room. You came back. The forgery couldn't keep you, because somewhere under everything you knew the real one was on a train going home, holding the rope, holding it open, not holding it shut." Her eyes were wet now too. "You didn't fail by feeling it. You proved it. You felt the realest thing about you and you came home to the person who's allowed to hold it. That's not a vulnerability, my love. That's the one door in you that only love is allowed through. She picked the lock. She didn't get to stay. I *live* there."

Linnéa made a sound, and then she was crying, finally, the whole thing she'd carried down off the hill and across a country, and Tatum gathered her in — and Linnéa let herself be gathered, let herself be held, let herself be still, the chosen way, the genuine article, in the arms of the still point she orbited and returned to and needed more than she had ever said. The train rocked them gently through the dark. Tatum held her and didn't let go and didn't require her to be anything at all, and Linnéa, for a long uninterrupted while, put it down, and rested, and stayed entirely herself the whole time.

Later — much later — the family ended up together in the lounge car the way they always did after, drawn into the same warm space without anyone proposing it, because the rule that had outlasted every other rule was the one about rewarding themselves, with each other and only with each other, and the reward, after this one, was simply *this:* the five of them in a swaying brass-and-mahogany room with the dark country streaming past, tangled close, Linnéa loose and quiet and lighter against Tatum's shoulder, Aiko half-asleep with her head in Vanessa's lap, Jordan's hand at the back of Vanessa's neck, no one performing, no one keeping anyone, every single one of them there because they had chosen it and gone on choosing it, every day, which was the whole of what made it the opposite of a house on a hill.

Vanessa looked around at them — her strange, lethal, chosen, *free* coven — and thought about the woman on the hill who had collected twenty women and ended up owning no one, and about herself, who had collected no one and owned no one and was, at this moment, the richest woman in the world.

"I'm sorry your holiday got wrecked," Aiko murmured, mostly asleep, into Vanessa's lap.

Vanessa smoothed the dark hair back from Aiko's face.

"Don't be," she said softly. "It's the best one I've ever had. I just had to do it my way." She looked out at the dark. "Apparently my way is to ruin a monster and bring twenty dead women back to life and call it a vacation." A pause, dry, fond, entirely herself. "I should have known. I've never once managed to simply *rest.*"

"None of us can," Aiko said, into her lap, already going under. "That's why we're the right people for each other."

And the train carried the five of them west through the Carpathian dark, toward the airport, toward the ocean, toward home — toward New York, and the apartment, and the gray inverted city, and the last warm ordinary thing this strange family had left to do.

Chapter 20

The Wreckers — "All Hallows" — Book #21

Chapter Twenty-One — The Coven

They were home four days before anyone mentioned witches.

New York took them back the way it always did, indifferent and enormous and gray, and the apartment closed around them like a held breath let out — the three sofas, the long windows, the East River a ribbon of pewter under a low November sky. The 'Ströms had peeled off at the airport, back to Stockholm, and Linnéa had already resumed texting Vanessa photographs of herself doing handstands in inappropriate places, which Vanessa took, correctly, as a sign that the world had been restored to its proper order. The snow globe with the tiny menaced peasant went on a shelf in the front room, for irony. The fang-shaped pasta sat in the cupboard, awaiting a victim. Aiko's servers came home and hummed back to life in their proper room, and the family did the small ordinary reassembling that a family does after it has been somewhere enormous, and for four days nobody said anything heavier than *whose turn is it to deal with the mail.*

On the fourth day Vanessa was lying upside down on the longest sofa.

It was not, this time, the upside-down of boredom — or not only. Her dark auburn hair pooled toward the floor and the city hung inverted above her, the skyline dripping up into a pewter sky, and she was looking at it the way she'd looked at it the morning all of this started, except that the thing pacing behind her eyes now wasn't *I'm bored,* not quite, not yet. It was something she didn't have a word for, and she was waiting, in her upside-down way, to find one.

Aiko found it for her.

She was cross-legged in the blue glow of her monitors, where she'd been most of the four days, and she said, without turning around, "I've been reading about witches."

"Of course you have," said Jordan, from the kitchen, where the espresso machine was hissing.

"No — listen. It's not what you think. It's not what *anyone* thinks." Aiko turned her chair around, and she had the particular flat

brightness she got when she'd found something true and chewed all the way through it. "I went looking because of the hill. Because she sold the vampire myth and called herself a kind of dark power, and because that word kept coming up about *us* — *you're a real witch,* the witch counts the doors, she's found a witch — and I wanted to know what the word actually *meant,* underneath the hats and the cauldrons. So I read. Properly. For four days." She pulled one knee up. "And it turns out the witch was never a woman with power over nature. That's the costume. The decoration. The fangs on the building." Her dark eyes were steady. "The witch was a woman with power, full stop. A woman who *knew* things — the midwife who knew which herb stopped a hemorrhage, the healer who knew more than the physician, the widow who owned her own land and answered to no man, the woman who said *no,* the woman who knew too much and bent to no one. *That* was the witch. Knowledge and will, in a body that was supposed to have neither."

The espresso machine had gone quiet. Jordan was listening.

"And the trials," Aiko went on, quieter now, "the burnings, the drownings, the whole machine of it — it wasn't about magic. It was about *erasing* those women. You take a woman who knows things and answers to no one, and you make her into a *witch,* and then you unmake her — burn her, drown her, cut her out of the village, cut her out of the record — until there's no one left to remember she existed, only the word you stuck to her on the way out." Aiko let it sit. "They took women who *existed,* and they unmade them, because a woman with knowledge and will frightened the people who ran things. Erased them down to a word. Down to nothing." She looked around at the room. "Sound like anyone we met?"

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"She wasn't a witch," Vanessa said slowly, still upside down, the city dripping up past her face, the word arriving. "The Contesa. She was the *other* thing. She was the one who burns them."

"She was the witch-hunter," Aiko agreed. "She found women with something in them — knowledge, will, a self, a fire — and she unmade them. Cut them out of every record until there was no one to report missing, only the costume she dressed them in. She did the exact thing the word was *invented* to do." A pause. "She just did it in a beautiful house and called it sainthood."

Jordan came around the counter with the coffee, and set a cortadito

on the low table beside Vanessa's upside-down head, the way he had the morning this all began, and said, "So who's the witch, then. In your reading."

Aiko looked at Vanessa for a long moment.

"A witch," she said, "is a woman with knowledge and will that the powerful can't control and have to erase. That's the whole definition, stripped of the hat." Her voice was very even. "So. A woman who knows things no one taught her she was allowed to know. Who answers to no one. Who walks into the houses of untouchable people and takes them apart with nothing but what she understands about how a person works. Whom no one has ever managed to own, or buy, or keep, or frighten into being smaller." She tilted her head. "And who walked up a hill last week into a house full of women who'd been unmade — burned down to a word, cut out of the record, erased the way they erased the midwives and the widows for five hundred years — and *brought them back.* Pulled twenty erased women up out of nothing and made them real again, by knowing exactly how it had been done and doing it in reverse." A faint, dry warmth. "Raising the dead. That's the oldest one in the book. That's the thing they were always most afraid the witch could actually do."

The inverted city hung gray and enormous above Vanessa's face, and she was very still.

"Jordan called it the first morning," Aiko said. "He didn't know how right he was. *You're a real witch.* Not the costume. The real one. The kind they had to invent a word for so they could burn it." She turned back toward her monitors, the lecture apparently concluded, and then added, almost as an afterthought, the truest thing of all: "She thought she was one of you. Up on the hill. *One recognizes one's own.*" A small shake of her head. "She had it exactly backwards. She wasn't the witch in that town. We were. She was the thing the witches finally came for."

The room was quiet. Outside, the November light moved on the river.

Vanessa swung herself slowly upright, the blood returning, the inverted city righting itself into the ordinary skyline, and she sat for a moment holding her cortadito and looking at her strange chosen family in the gray afternoon — Jordan leaning in the kitchen doorway, Aiko folded glowing in her corner — and felt the thing she'd been waiting four days to find a word for finally arrive, and the word was not *bored,* though boredom was in it somewhere, the way it

always was, the way it always would be.

The word was *home.*

"You know what the trouble with that is," she said, after a while.

"With being a witch?" said Aiko.

"With raising the dead. With finally finding the one thing I'm good at that *builds* instead of breaks." Vanessa sipped her coffee, and the old light was already coming up behind her eyes, slow and wicked and inevitable, the appetite that no holiday and no graveyard and no resurrection had ever once managed to lay to rest. "It's going to be very hard, now, to go back to merely ruining people. I'm going to want to do the other thing again." She set the cup down. "I'm going to get *ideas.*"

"You're already getting ideas," Jordan observed. "I can see them from here."

"I might be getting ideas."

"God help us all," said Aiko, with enormous fondness, and unfolded herself from her corner, and crossed the room, and — because the work was finished, and the family was home, and there was nothing left to do tonight but be exactly what they were to each other — she leaned down and kissed the top of Vanessa's auburn head, the way you kiss something you have chosen, every day, on purpose, for as long as you both keep choosing it.

"Get your ideas in the morning," she said. "I'll find you a monster worth the trouble." She straightened, and started toward the room where her servers hummed, and over her shoulder, light as anything, free as anything, she gave Vanessa the one word in the world that means *I am yours* — given the way only a woman no one could ever take is able to give it, which is to say, entirely as a gift:

"Goodnight, Ma'am."

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